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THE CONSTRUCTION OF UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS' IDENTITY IN MEXICO

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**THE CONSTRUCTION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS'
IDENTITY IN MEXICO**

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the concept of university students' identity formation in Mexico. By looking at the way students related higher education to different areas of their lives, it has been possible to find different sources for their identity formation. This was done through a qualitative analysis of three different types of discourse: the students' accounts, the academics' points of view and the mission statements of the institutions involved.

The analysis from these different angles indicated that in the process of students' identity formation different types of discourses can interact, meet and collide in the educational scenario provided by the universities' 'habitat'. Out of this interaction, there were similarities and differences in the ways students constructed their identities related to the type of institution the attended (public or private), field of studies, gender and a students' localization (foreign or local).

The implications of this study might influence the field of theory by presenting a case where the negotiation of an identity presents issues of agency and structure interaction. It could also offer insights into how identities can be approached through biographical material. Lastly, it could invite some reflection as to the organisational teaching and learning practices in similar educational institutions.

DEDICATION

Dedico esta tesis a mis padres
Luis Rodríguez y Juana Bulnes
quienes sabiamente me enseñaron
el valor de la educación.

A mi esposo, David,
cuyo amor, cuidados y apoyo
sólo podría pagar con la misma moneda.

A mi familia en México
Por su apoyo desde la distancia.

I dedicate this thesis to my parents
Luis Rodriguez and Juana Bulnes,
who wisely taught me the value of education.

To my husband, David,
whose love, care and support
I could only pay with the same currency.

And to my family back home
for their love and support from the distance.

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Foreword: ‘My-self’ and education

When I think about the influence education has had in my life, I can see how that has influenced my identity in some ways. Coming from a low socio-economic background, early in my life I must have ‘learned’ that if I had in education, I would not have to worry about lacking other things. I think that because I always had to rely on scholarships to go from secondary school to postgraduate education, has given education a strong personal value in my life.

Somehow my background reminds me that there are social circumstances that could strongly influence and direct the type of life we live. It has also taught me that as long as there are choices, I can make decisions. When I think about the debates between agency and structure at the abstract level, my mind goes to examples of people who have accomplished what they wanted despite of their unprivileged background. It also goes to those cases where adverse social circumstances seem to keep pulling them lower and farther from success. Yet, still family background, gender, and class seem to define many routes for some people; however, as Profr. Lynn Davies writes: as long as there is even a minuscule spark that can challenge the established regime, there is hope (Davies, 1996).

My belief in education as something that liberates and gives options is what has taken me to work in this field from teaching adults how to read and write to teaching in university. As an educator, it has always been my interest (and intrigue!) to know what makes people want to be educated. I perhaps do that in an interest to find and validate my own reasons to believe in education; my own ways to confirm my identity as an educated woman.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Introduction

This thesis reports a qualitative study of identity in university students. The study was conducted in two Mexican universities, a private and a State university. The participants in this research were undergraduate students and academic secretaries from the science and social science departments in the institutions mentioned above. This first chapter of the thesis presents the background of the study, the aims and questions that guided the research as well as an overview of the methodology. Its concluding section specifies the delimitations of the study. The following section provides a list of key terms used throughout the thesis.

1.1 Definition of key terms

These are some of the terms I have used throughout the thesis and which need to be explained beforehand:

Use of acronyms :

HE: Higher Education

HEIs: Higher Education Institutions

UANL: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon)

ITESM: Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (Technological Institute of Superior Studies of Monterrey)

Definition of types of universities:

Public university: In Mexico, these are the State universities and although funded by Federal and State funds, they retain autonomy in their organization. Their tuition fees are lower than in the private ones. UANL is an example.

Private university: These are privately-funded institutions which are directed by a Board of Trustees and receive funds from the Private Sector. Tuition fees constitute part of this funding. ITESM is an example.

There are other key terms that have been used to describe characteristics of the participants such as 'local' and 'foreign' and they are explained in chapter 4 to identify the quotations used in the presentation of findings.

1.2 Background to the study

My motivation to embark on a study of university students' identity was primarily based on my experience of teaching at two types of universities (private and public). In the two institutions I could see how university students seemed to have an 'image' or 'idea' of who they were as students and who or what they would become in the future after they graduated from one university or the other. I could gather these views from discussions we had in class as well as from conversations at informal gatherings. I also saw that these views were somehow shared by some academics. Outside the university, another instance where this 'difference' between graduates from the public and the private universities was reflected was the employment rates favouring one of these two groups. Looking at how students seemed to draw a definition of who they were in the present, as well as in the future as graduates from one university or the other, I decided to look into the issue of identity formation in the university taking into account the views from the students, senior academics and the official documents of the institutions. I wanted to have different angles or voices that would speak of the way in which students formed their identities.

Before starting this study, there were two things I could use from my experience. I had some knowledge about the state of university education in the international as well as in the local context of the universities where I was working. Also, from my experience talking to students, I intuitively knew that they would want to 'talk' about what

education meant for them if the questions were addressed properly. Because they seemed to be often 'ready' to talk about their experiences, I thought something like an anonymous 'story' or 'account' would help me get to their views on the type of influences education may be having on their lives as they constructed their identity. What follows are some of the (hypothetical?) views that informed the design and development of my research.

With the value that education, and specifically Higher Education, has taken these days, individuals find themselves surrounded by messages that suggest that an educated person is

the best to fit the actual demands of a contemporary society. This seems to be voiced by discourses coming from academic, social and economic spheres. The reasons to promote such a project appeal not always to a personal motivation to be educated but often, in order to respond to a social commitment i.e. help develop their country. This situation puts the individuals and the educational institutions into an interesting interplay where the institutions seem to be able to provide the formula for the success of the individuals. Educational institutions have been presented and commonly been accepted as the regulators of the individuals' sense of achievement or failure. This has transformed the way the persons see themselves as part of an educated or non-educated community.

This scenario is not a novelty and education has long been considered a part of the 'cultural investment' of a society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). However, the emphasis on evaluating people's skills and knowledge to make them successful participants of a globalised world (economically, politically and socially speaking) seems to be changing the way individuals interact and identify themselves as members of a society (Beck, 1994; Bauman, 1998). This also places educational institutions in a powerful position as bodies which legitimize the type of knowledge that the society will regard as valid and suitable. This has created a dialectical relationship between what the 'society' is seen to want and what the HEIs produce, intrinsically linked to economic and political demands

at a local, national and international level. How are individuals coping with this as they define and re-define their identity in these scenarios? My interest in this big question generates the following hypothetical views about the interaction between higher education and the definition and reformulation of university students' identity as a process of ongoing negotiations, and the way in which personal accounts can give important insights into this process.

The first view I would like to put forward is that the position of HE as a central parameter for success in society urges individuals to organise and define their identity in relation to this institution. HEIs become a site for the formulation and reformulation of the individuals' identity as they interact with the way the institution organises knowledge, its access and production and makes them participants in this knowledge formation. It also influences the way students perceive themselves with respect to other people who have less or no access to it. The educational site becomes an arena where students' identity construction is lived as part of the process of being educated. Sometimes this is questioned, at other times it happens 'silently'.

The second point I would like to make is that the fact that universities as HEIs become a site for identity formation has public as well as private implications. The issue of identity formation could be seen as a very personal and rather intimate matter; however, it has a wider influence if we think how a collective identity influences the way a society is organised. When individuals evaluate their lives in terms of their educational experiences and ask themselves questions like who they are and what they are doing or will do, these questions bear both a public and a private weight. When others are evaluating them in terms of their education, the public side becomes more apparent, even if it then reverts to being a personal issue as to how they define themselves when responding to a public question like that.

On the whole, HEIs seem to play a key part in the way students see and identify themselves as educated or non-educated persons. If the role of these institutions is as crucial as it is described here, it is relevant to make a critical analysis of how they see

themselves as part of this process. At the same time, if students see these institutions as an important factor in the (trans)formation of their identity, it is just valid to analyse how determinant or rather circumstantial the influence of the universities is in the opinion of the students. Another area could be the overlapping 'claims for identity formation' addressed in the universities' discourse and those found in the students'. There may be points or attributes in the students' identity that both the individual and the institution assume as a result of being educated. The degree to which this is questioned by either one may show the level of reflexivity in such judgements.

The third issue then has to do with the level of reflection on the side of the HEIs as to their role in the formation of students' identity and how they see these students as part of the educational system and the wider social context. I would argue that the reflection is minimal. Driven mostly by economical and political forces, HEIs seem to strive to respond to the demands of a society that is ever changing and transforming. The discourses of globalisation, the learning society, competencies and skills, occupy most of their lines of action. In the voice of senior academics, an echo of these voices is heard. Some stop to reflect and question these themes, others seem to find legitimacy in the words written by big names and canons in slogans for global trends in education and the university of the future. I would argue that often these academics, as part of the institution, find themselves repeating the discourse they read from central offices and official names. They themselves recreate their identity as part of the interaction they have with the institution and the students. Perhaps they find solidarity and compliance with the goals of the institution and have made the University's talk their own. However, my interest here is focused on exploring how they see students as part of the official discourse used by the institutions and not how they create their own academic identity.

As a last point I would like to stress the importance of the students' accounts as a relevant piece of knowledge in my research. Students' narratives may provide clues as to how students position themselves in relation to education. These accounts may

inform my research as to how students see the education they are receiving, how influential it has been in their lives and how they see it as shaping their future as university graduates. They could also give an account of their identity when they define themselves as university students (sense of location) and how they see themselves as part of this community of educated people (sense of belonging) and a specific social position (status). In the concepts they relate to education inscribed in their accounts, one could find the different meanings involved in the development of their educational identities. The different meanings in their personal accounts could bring many insights into the process of negotiation of identity or identities they engage in when they define who they are inside and outside the university community.

Personal accounts reveal the point when a personal and intimate issue, such as the meanings which you relate to higher education, becomes a public one, like what type of individual you think education is making of you and how this will make you function in society. An account of this nature may bring insights into how each individual has experienced university education according to their age, gender and socio-economic background. Education may give them a timeline where their identities can be traced and located at specific points. While it can be argued that this may reinforce the structural determinacy of education and uncritically infer an institutional identity in people, it offers for the group investigated here a starting point in a coherent personal account. Acknowledging such a discrepancy, I still believe their accounts could enrich an analysis of their identity formation. Another area of analysis focusing on how students write their accounts is the extent to which their 'private-student discourse' reflects the 'public-academic discourse'. It would be important to see how students make or do not make use of the latter and for what purpose: legitimacy, to impress an imaginary audience, to validate their position in HE or to imitate or ridicule the system. With these views in mind, I formulated the following aims of the study.

1.3 Aims of the research

The aim of my research was to explore the ways in which university students construct their educational identity and how the universities participated in this process. By analysing the meanings the students related to HE in their accounts, I intended to point out issues of public domain in the area of HE that influenced the way in which a private personal matter as identity was constructed.

I wanted to find out how the ‘positions’ of both the Higher Education Institutions and the students, as members of an educated society, interacted in a ‘social game’ where the acquisition of a degree was highly valued and sometimes promised as an entry to a successful life. It was also my interest to explore ways in which a personal account could provide insights as to how the students’ constructed their identity, departing from the meanings they gave to education, as they interacted within an educational institution. An additional motivation was to see whether a biographical account of the type I used, could open a window to analyse how issues like field of study, age, gender and/or social background of the students could be implicated in the way students structured their ‘positioning’ with respect to Higher Education. As will be discussed later in my reflections on how the methodology worked (section 3.6.2), this original aim appeared to be rather ambitious since due to limitations in the data, the claims I could make about such issues were limited and a further and more developed investigation would have been out of the scope of this study.

A final hope was that by looking at the issues of HE and students’ identity, I could develop a more critical view of the ways in which universities have an influence in the formation of students’ identity. I also wanted to reflect and critically see my position as a university lecturer and the ways in which this could be influencing my students’ identity.

1.4 Research questions

In order to reach the final aim of the study which was to explore how university students constructed their identity as well as to see the role of the institutions in this process of identity construction, these are the general questions that initiated my research:

_ How is Higher Education presented or seen by 'society' in our days, for example by the official discourses found in the university mission statements and the opinion of senior academics?

_ How does Higher Education contribute to position the individuals in the wider context of society? That is, what are the 'images' that the public discourse of Higher Education project about the students, their attributes, characteristics, and identity?

_ What effects do educational institutions claim to have on the formation of individuals?

_ How do individuals 'position' themselves in relation to Higher Education and how this 'positioning' is reflected in the meanings they attach to Higher Education?

- Depending on the meanings students attach to HE, what different types of educational identities are being developed in the contexts in HE Institutions today?

_ To what extent is the public discourse of Higher Education Institutions being used by students in their private discourse? How have they incorporated the official discourse into their own? If they have, what does it suggest about the critical view students may/may not exercise when they use this discourse to describe their own identity?

In order to research the previous questions, I followed a qualitative methodology which is briefly described in the paragraphs below and more detailed in chapter 3.

1.5 Overview of methodology

The methodology used in this study was predominantly qualitative with the quantitative results mainly used to arrange the presentation of the qualitative categories of analysis. There were three types of methods used to collect data: biographical accounts, semi-structured interviews and official documents from the universities. The data rendered from these three sources was textual and the process followed for its analysis was coding consisting of two types: first level coding and pattern coding, based on the general principles of grounded theory. The principles guiding this process as well as the steps followed to generate the categories for further discussion are addressed and fully developed in chapter 3 of this thesis.

1.6 Context of the study: HE in Mexico and in Nuevo Leon

In order to contextualize this study, I shall first present a picture of the state of Higher Education in Mexico and particularly, of Nuevo Leon, the State where I conducted the research. By giving this description, I want to underline that the characteristics of the contexts make the study of the students' identity relevant. The institutions where the study was conducted are going through changes in their curriculum and their practices that follow not only the global trends of a homogenization of HE practices but also they are inserted into a national context which demands specific answers from them. In this complex scenario, the students are at the centre of all these changes and it is important to analyse how this is affecting the way they identify themselves as 'educated citizens' expected to graduate and make decisions for the future.

1.6.1 Higher Education in the national context

Mexico's higher education system is organised into public or State institutions and privately- funded ones. There is at least one public university in each State and the number of private institutions keeps growing at a rate of 2 new HEIs per month according to an interview with the Ministry of Education (January, 2002, www.elnorte.com). Muller and Subotzky (2001) write about the challenges third world economies face as they see the need to find their place in the big global arena, and at the same time, to attend to the basic needs of development from their marginalized areas. This is the case of Mexico. In the National Plan of Education (NPE), the keywords are equity, quality and the capacity to respond to social needs. The first aim is to "educate for life". The second aim is to modernize the system (Educación 2001: 2001). In the eyes of the NPE, "education is the determinant mechanism to boost and speed emancipation" (Ibid: 2). For the privately funded institutions, Dr. Rangel (January, 2002, www.elnorte.com), director of ITESM - the leading private university in Mexico - said, in a subtle critique of the NPE, that the main priority in education should be to look for ways to satisfy the country's basic needs, before launching the big projects of modernization. These contrasting points of views show the discrepancy between modernizing and fulfilling basic needs underlined by Muller and Subotzky (2001).

In response to the need to develop the country's human capital, the Mexican government has joined the trend of mass education, issuing policies of widening participation that have brought some problems. This process has instigated the proliferation of higher education institutions - at least 600 - where neither programs nor administration fulfil the Ministry of Education requirements for accreditation (Climent, 2001). The idea to populate the cities with HEIs keeps alive the illusion of access to everyone. In other cases, the widening participation policies often clash with the infrastructure of the local or regional governments, as it the case of the State University in Nuevo Leon.

1.6.2 The situation of Higher Education in the State of Nuevo Leon, Mexico

In the recent student selection process (July, 2004) in Nuevo Leon, only 60% of the applicants were accepted into the university, while the rest were sent to other State run institutions (<http://www.elnorte.com/vida/articulo/435811>). The demand for university education is growing in every State and Nuevo Leon is no exception; on the contrary, it is a place that attracts students from all over Mexico and the rest of Latin America. Economically and socially speaking, Nuevo Leon represents an attractive option for students in the northeast area of the country. It is ranked fourth out of six States where most students migrate in order to do their university education in Mexico (<http://www.anuies.mx>¹). Being a city with an intense commercial and service-provider activity, employment opportunities are higher than in its neighbouring States. This has a direct effect on the size of the student population attending the universities.

The State of Nuevo Leon, located in the northeast part of the country and bordering with Texas, USA, is considered as the centre of trade and business in the north of Mexico. Monterrey, capital of Nuevo Leon, is the third most important city in the country. It has a concentration of most of the economic activity, business and services which represent an important part of its economy (www.inegi.gob.mx²). Along with its metropolitan area, Monterrey has become the home of trade in the eyes of investors, especially after the National Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed with the USA and Canada more than a decade ago. In terms of educational standards, in basic primary education, Nuevo Leon occupies the first place in academic achievement followed by the Federal District (capital of the country) in the National Evaluation chart published by the education authorities (*Educación 2001*: 4). As to HEIs, Nuevo Leon has 22 public HEIs, and 66 privately funded ones. However, there are only 6 officially

¹ ANUIES stands for Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Institutos de Educación Superior (National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions).

² INEGI stands for Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (National Institute of Geography, Statistics and Informatics)

recognized by the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES). Part of the reason why there is only a small number of accredited institutions is that most the others are in the process of accreditation and this may take years. While bureaucracy may contribute to this long process, it can be also that these institutions do not fulfil the requirements demanded by ANUIES and therefore are unable finalise their accreditation process in a shorter period. While they are in this process, they can still issue academic degrees as long as they are affiliated to the State Ministry of Education. The questions this situation poses as to the quality of education these smaller and not fully accredited institutions deliver is a matter of debate and a problem that seems to have no easy solution given the high demand by students and the relaxed regulations by the central government (de Garay, 2002).

The two universities I have used in my study are accredited by ANUIES and the ones with the highest population of students in the State. The Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo Leon, which is a government funded university, receives 38% of the student population in the State. The other institution, the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM), is a private funded institution and it absorbs 23% of the population (ANUIES 2002). They both have been established for more than 50 years and their reputation is well known throughout the country. In fact, ITESM is one of the leading private HEIs in Latin America.

The state of HE in Mexico reflects the divergent tendencies found in the way societies are trying to attain the benefits that education could bring. On one hand, there is a strong emphasis on producing the graduates that the society needs to make the country develop. On the other hand, there are also aspirations to offer education for life and emancipation. As HEIs in the region of Nuevo Leon are trying to respond to these needs, an interest of my study is to find out how these institutions are facing this challenge and under what role they are presenting themselves to the students in particular. A second interest lies in the views of the students as to how this education is

affecting their lives in a society where a university degree is highly valued. To what extent does that influence their definition of who they are?

1.7 Delimitations of the study

The delimitations of this study refer to the boundaries and the level of generalisability that its findings could achieve (Glatthorn, 1998). In terms of boundaries, one of the limitations of this study has to do with the size and nature of the sample studied. In terms of the students' sample, it includes only the two largest universities in the State of Nuevo Leon leaving out other degree awarding institutions, such as some of the teacher training centres and technologically oriented institutions, which also confer Bachelor and Master Degrees, for example. I am aware that this could 'privilege' certain voices and obscure others and this is an issue I address by explaining the use of 'theoretical sampling' strategy which I detail in chapter 3 under issues of validity and ethics as is explained in more.

As to the academics' sample, I must clarify that the interviews were limited to only four of the academics in senior positions (heads of the department) not including the opinions of junior academics in the departments. This restriction followed the criteria that these participants could provide the information that I considered relevant for my research questions since they were key figures in the decision making of their departments and were taken as 'representatives' of the official discourse of HE. The previous decision to include only key figures left out the views from other academics (perhaps less senior) in the department who could have provided differing views which contrasted with what I obtained from my interviews. From this point of view, the interpretations I draw from the 'academic views' should be considered taking into account these limitations as well as my interest in using the academics' discourse as a background for the discussion of the data emerged from the students' accounts which was the central issue in the study.

Another limitation of this study has to do with the time constraints of PhD research. Due to budget and human resource constraints, I needed to gather all the information in only one trip. This made it impossible to conduct pilot studies with the technique I used to collect students' data, this created potential limitations as to the type of information the methodology generated and the type of analysis conducted in order to answer my research questions. The fact that the accounts the students wrote did not follow the traditional narrative format made it impossible to analyse the structure of their accounts under the principles of narrative or story analysis, for example. An alternative to this was to analyse them following a grounded theory approach where the meanings they connected to the concept of higher education served as the initial categories of analysis. The challenges this limitation brought to the study, made me reflect on the future possibility of research using this method in combination with another type of narrative exercise if the emphasis is to remain on biographical research through narratives.

1.8 Organisation of the dissertation

The content of this thesis is organised into 6 chapters: Introduction and context of the study; higher education and the construction of students' identity (literature review); research design; presentation of analysis and findings and implications of findings and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 1 **Introduction and context of the study** has presented the context of this research by giving an overview of how this study was motivated by reflecting on the different ways higher education is carried out in Mexico and giving special attention to the Higher Education Institutions in the State where the study was conducted. This chapter has also introduced the aims of the study and the research questions as well as a general overview of the methodology and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2 **Higher education and the construction of students' identity** discusses the literature relevant to the areas of identity and education, in general It gives an overview of the different studies where these two issues have been explored following different approaches and methodologies. The results of these studies and their relevance are

illuminated as stepping stones for the present study. They have also revealed some of the spaces and questions left open, validating the presence of this research. The last part of this chapter presents the theoretical framework that informs the design and conduction of this research.

Chapter 3 **Research design** covers a description of the methods used to carry out this study. First, it focuses on the qualitative methodology framework, specifically the topic of biographical research. Then it describes the different methods used to collect the data: semi-structured interviews, biographical accounts and documents. A third part presents the process followed to analyse the three sources of data collected. The last part includes a reflection on the experience of using biographical accounts as a major source of data complemented by documentary and interview generated texts. This reflection includes an evaluation of the use of technology in the qualitative analysis as well. A last section deals with the issues of validity and reliability of the study as well as ethical concerns.

Chapter 4 **Presentation of data analysis and findings** presents the results of the analysis conducted of the interviews, the biographical accounts and the official documents in a detailed manner.

Chapter 5 **Discussion of findings: HE ideology and habitus** outlines the main themes for discussion generated from the study putting them in the context of HE ideology and habitus and relating them to identity construction theories and methodological approaches in research in education.

Chapter 6 **Discussion of findings: HE identity and forms of capital** presents a description of the different types of identities found through the meanings attached to HE as found in the analysis of the different discourses in the study. The discussion of these identities is done seeing HE as a resource and investment which represents a form of capital for the students. Depending on what constitutes these forms of capital, a type of identity is identified.

Chapter 7 **Implications of the study and suggestions for further research** looks back at the aims of the study and the extent to which the research conducted was able to reach them; reflecting on the research questions posed and establishing a link to the theoretical perspectives introduced earlier in the thesis. The second part of this chapter deals with the implications of this study in three different areas: the discipline, methodological approaches in educational research and lastly, educational practices of higher education practitioners. The concluding part contains suggestions for further research after reflection on the scope and reach of the present study.

2. HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF STUDENTS' IDENTITY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of the studies involving educational institutions and their influence on students' identity that serve as a background to my study as well as the theoretical framework used in the design and development of this research. The overview of the studies is intended to show the diversity and progression of themes of study and methodological approaches followed within research carried out in this area. It also underlines the relevance and complexity of the study of identity construction as well as the need for new developments in the concepts and methodologies involved. The second part of the chapter presents the theories and concepts that inform the design and development of this research.

In order to explore the way in which students and educational institutions relate to each other and how this has an impact on the way students build their identity as educated people in the society, I have used Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of *field*, *habitus* and *cultural capital*. To argue for the centrality of the concept of capital theory, I have brought into the discussion Coleman's (1988) concept of *social capital* to underline the value that networking has for university students. In order to look into the process of identity construction, I have used Anthony Giddens's (1984) *structuration theory*, as well as Richard Jenkins's (1996) process of *dialectical construction of identities* which consider relevant both the individuals' agency as well as the 'structuring practices' found in social interactions. In this way, the impact of the educational institutions practices as well as the way the individuals respond to this impact are relevant in the construction of their identities.

In order to clarify how I am looking into the process of identity construction in university students through their accounts, it is important to define the meaning of identity I am using in the context of this research. First of all, it is also important to underline that attempting to generate a definition of identity is not a simple matter since

the term may involve numerous possibilities, depending on the context where it is deployed and also as authors such as Hall (1990) and Castells (1997) contend, depending on the purpose of those who define it. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, I am using the term identity to refer to the socially constructed 'identification' that students make of themselves drawing from the meanings they attach to education. In this sense, these meanings serve as a platform from which students elaborate a way to identify themselves as members of a group (university educated people). This 'pool of meanings', if I may use such metaphor, is constituted by the different messages about the value and significance of HE. It is in this 'pool' of meanings where I am trying to trace the students' identity. Following a discursive approach, identity is a construction, a process never completed but continuously (re) created by the individuals and their interaction with the discourses around them. Therefore, the concept of identity deployed here is therefore not an essentialist but a dynamic and dialectical one where individual and social interests reciprocally influence each other (1996). Situating this notion of identity inside Giddens' theory (1990), identity is a process, a trajectory of the self which changes according to context (individual and situational circumstances). According to the definition used by Castell (1997) in his work *The power of identity*, the identification people make of themselves is rooted in a system of meanings they developed about events in their lives. This system of meanings becomes their identity as they draw from this 'base' to define who they are. Another important notion in Castells' (1997) theory of the construction of identity is that individuals give priority to one source of meanings over others, depending on the context where they see their identity 'called upon' (concept also advocated by Jenkins 1996); that is, in some cases it is religion the source of meanings, other times is ethnicity, or sexuality. In my study, I think it is important to clarify that that I am analysing the identity of students giving priority to education over other sources of meanings students may have. This implies that although there are other latent issues that could have been explored in the same magnitude in students' identity, such as gender and probably social class, I focused on their identity as 'students' through the meanings they give to education. As alluded in the delimitations of the study, the importance of issues like those in a sample which showed differences in gender, discipline and institution attended was always present

and the limited reference I made to them was done in the interest not to ignore them, yet a more complete analysis and discussions were outside the possibilities of this study.

Summarising, I would like to borrow Antikainen's concept of 'educational identity' (1996) to better indicate how I am defining identity within the aims and scope of this research and what I am referring to when I write about students' identity in this thesis. It is an identity constructed departing from the meanings students attach to higher education and which I could find in the discursive constructions they used in their writings.

This last part of the theoretical background underlines the importance of *discourse analysis* in studying identity formation since it can help understand wider social issues such as the ideological orientations and changes found in current educational practices and how individuals like the students and the academics are dealing with these changes. By using these concepts, I wish to put forward the idea that education and its habitus have an impact on the construction of students' identity and that this construction involves issues of individual agency and structuring practices. At the same time, I wish to claim that this interaction could be accessed by looking at the different discourses surrounding HE and its ideology and how they can be revealed through the way students, academics and official documents write or talk about it.

2.1 Education and identity: background studies

The effect of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on students has been a topic of research for years, and the variety of research themes in the area as well as the methodologies applied has been diverse. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) conducted a comprehensive study where they analysed the themes and findings of research done in the previous 20 years about the impact of higher education on students' development. The issues these studies have looked at include learning outcomes, achievement, change in attitudes and values. These studies have explored, for example, how different characteristics of an institution such as size, admission policies and financial aid policies to students have influenced the students' experience through college and

university. Pascarella and Terenzini's analysis of over 2600 studies shows not only the different research models applied and the prevalence of the positivist approach during the time when these studies were conducted but also emphasises the complexity of the issue studied and the need to keep looking for ways to investigate this area of education.

The general agreement in Pascarella and Terenzini's review was that during their years in college and university, students go through different types of changes and that these changes vary as to how evident or apparent they are. In terms of cognitive changes, students tend to increase their knowledge acquisition, their ability to make decisions as well as their critical thinking skills. In terms of affective changes, studies report modified attitudes and values developing a more open view on issues like religious conviction, education and politics; students also seem to have a higher level of self-esteem and aspiration (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991: 566-72). The difference in degree of change in students depends on the area studied (cognitive, affective, and psychosocial) and there have been areas like students' autonomy or sense of independence and moral development, where only modest change has been reported. Pascarella and Terenzini argue that this apparent absence of change may be attributed to the difficulty in researching areas of a more subjective nature, like sense of autonomy, for example. They hypothesise that the subjectivity involved in researching issues of that nature may be a possible cause of weak evidence in certain areas of student change (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991: 573). So while knowledge of a subject can be investigated by applying certain tests, judging if a behaviour or action has been right or wrong or deciding how independent a student has become would involve a different type of study, one needing a more detailed exploration.

One of the things Pascarella and Terenzini also pointed out was the fact that the changes mentioned above may happen independently of the individuals' period of study, and therefore may be directly and indirectly related to students' attendance at universities or colleges. They argued that some of these changes may be due to pure developmental reasons and that such changes could happen to individuals regardless of their attendance at college. In terms of research methodology, they emphasised the need to take into

account the students' background as well as other environment characteristics as variables in further studies. Most of the cases they analysed were studies carried out as part of a national project where standard tests and surveys were the most popular techniques. This explains, partly, why a positivist approach would have been more welcome and suitable for these studies. Pascarella and Terenzini's work shows not only how complex studying changes in students due to education could be, but how there is a need to revise and innovate the ways in which interactions between students and educational institutions are researched. It is my intention that the approach and methodology used in my study may contribute to partly satisfying this need.

To point out the effects of higher education on students' identity Chickering (1969) developed a model to show the different areas where this influence could be seen. This model was developed at a time when the "student development point of view" had not gained the popularity among academics and professionals that it has now. Based on the argument that higher education should foster the development of human talent and potentials and not only the mastery of instrumental skills, Chickering and Reisser (1993) published a refined version of the previous model with the following seven vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward independence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose and developing integrity (Ibid: 35). They relied strongly on Pascarella and Terenzini's findings that the impact college had on students could cover a rather broad range of issues (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991: 573) and now their analysis included gender, ethnicity and minority studies, which had not been considered before. Their focus on students' identity as one of the vectors in their model (establishing identity) echoes their agreement with Pascarella and Terenzini that during the years in further education "progress is made toward the development of personal identities and more positive self-concepts" (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991: 564; Chickering & Reisser 1993: xiii). They point out that in higher education "developing identity is like assembling a puzzle" (Chickering & Reisser 1993: 48) because of the variety of processes students go through such as developing intellectual competence, emotional maturity, autonomy and positive relationships, among others. Another important factor in this 'puzzle' was the characteristics of the higher educational

settings that might be related to identity development an issue that has been rarely focused on in identity studies as lamented by Pascarella & Terenzini (Chickering & Reisser 1993: 180).

Chickering and Reisser's model could act as a map to explore where the impact of education on students' identity would be more apparent. Although their model deals more with psychosocial and cognitive theories, it is still easy to find the connections between these theories and the interventions of environmental factors affecting the formation of students' identity. The fact that their analysis includes studies of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and perceptions of knowledge (Magolda, 1992), for example, reflects how their model can account for more than just developmental factors of identity construction. Although I disagree with the wording of their model when it presents identity as something that could be 'established', the notions around which they define identity throughout the book actually talk about a more 'dynamic' or 'developing' sense of identity which "involves re-examining belief systems about a larger reality, about our place in the universe, the meanings of life and death, and our purpose for being here. It involves making our journey upwards" (Chickering & Reisser 1993: 207).

Both Pascarella and Terenzini and Chickering and Reisser's reviews suggest that in studies about education and its effects on students, the range of research approaches and methodologies in the last decade has been wide, yet dominated by a stronger quantitative and positivist approach. They have also suggested that as different issues become relevant, the thematic orientations need to be renewed including gender and ethnicity issues, for example. A third recommendation was to look at external factors in the educational environments that could affect identity formation. The type of study I conducted follows part of these suggestions by exploring the issue of identity construction following a predominantly qualitative methodology and looking at issues like gender, discipline and institutional character in its analysis.

The following studies show how research in the area of institutions and students' interaction has moved forward from the studies Pascarella and Terenzini reviewed. The innovations in research are related to wider themes of study and to new methodologies or approaches following some of the suggestions mentioned above. Taking Pascarella's research further by emphasising the students' background as a variable in their research model, Pike, Kuh and Gonyea (2003) conducted a study to see how institutional missions influenced students' involvement and their reports on educational outcomes. They found that, contrary to general assumption, social involvement was as relevant to learning and intellectual development as academic involvement and that students reported more gains in these two areas, particularly in institutions where their level of involvement was higher. This suggested that what students report as gains in learning outcomes and intellectual development (although the meaning of these terms is not explained by the authors) may be attributed more to the type of students enrolled in an institution rather than to what the institution claims as its mission. They speculated that it was the students' background plus, perhaps, the reputation and admission policies of the institutions that had influenced what students reported as relevant gains in their university experience. This study did not undermine the influence of institutions on students; instead, it suggested that this experience can be seen and reported very differently from campus to campus due to the varied nature of the students enrolled (Pike, Kuh & Gonyea 2003: 259). They agree that due to the changing nature in student population and the way institutions are being organised according to their mission statements and academic ratings, more inclusive models of research are needed to look at the diversity in both student population and institutions. The study that I conducted explores issues of a similar nature as it tries to find out how the 'environment' of the institutions (experience from campus to campus) may affect the way in which students connect higher education with their lives; at the same time, it examines how students react to the messages in the mission statements when they write about what they 'gain' from higher education.

The innovations in theories and related methodological approaches such as gender, ethnicity, class and culture, have brought changes to the ways research is done. In

educational research, the characteristics of higher education these days have also introduced new issues. The changes in the way higher education is organized, for example, into private and public institutions as well as the diversity in students' population have brought new topics to the researchers' agenda. Studies related to the socialisation of students in the institution, to whether it is state-funded or private, to gender and cultural diversity as well as to generational perceptions of education have attracted more attention recently. These changes have motivated researchers to look into education from different perspectives and with different approaches. Hu and Kuh (2002) carried out a study in 123 higher education institutions in the US to investigate the relationship between the type of funding in institutions and the level of engagement in the students. Their research suggested that there was a connection between students' family and educational background, gender, and the type of institution (private or public) students went to. They found that parental education and student academic preparation were positively associated with higher levels of engagement. In terms of gender, male students were less motivated than females to participate in events. The students from the private institutions showed more commitment to become involved in activities organised by their colleges than did the students from public institutions. Their conclusions indicated that in the evaluation of the college, it was the students' inclination to become involved in the college's activities rather than what the college had done to get them involved. That is, it was more a personal than an institutional variable that had made the change in the students' evaluation of their experience in college. The difference in meanings given to education depending on the type of university students attended (private or public) was one of the interests of my research. I wanted to find out how students valued education depending on the university they were going to. I was also interested in finding out how this perception of education was connected with their socio-economic background; how their background would influence their opinion on what university education meant for them would also influence how they saw themselves as educated people in the society. As I analysed students' answers, it became apparent how in some areas the perception students had of education varied depending on the university attended; however, it also became apparent that these differences were less compared to the areas where their perceptions coincided. Connecting these findings with the issue of identity, it could mean that in the

way students identified themselves as educated people, there was more weight from the meanings they shared about education, than with the type of university attended. It could also mean that there were some areas where some differences could be found as will be discussed in chapter 6.

Although my study did not look into the students' family background through specific methodology, for example, collecting data about the students' family income, I could assume that students from the state-funded university would tend to belong to either a low or middle-income family; while the ones from the private-funded university would come from upper middle to high-income families. One indication for this preference is the reputation both systems have and although State universities have had a high academic reputation in Mexico, there is also the idea (along with the employment statistics mentioned before) that private university graduates are better prepared to respond to the labour market demands today. When the success of private university graduates is seen as their ability to secure high paying jobs, it is not difficult to see why parents would be willing to pay higher fees thinking that such kind of success is almost guaranteed for their children. For families with lower incomes a State university with lower tuition fees might be the only option to educate their children.

Studying socialisation processes in a US Community College with two-year programmes, Ethington (2000) researched the influences of the 'normative' environment on students' perception of growth and development. Normative here implies the social rules of the peer group and student culture, although this is not clarified by the author. Her study reported that variables such as the way the curriculum in the institution was organized, the size of the campus and the interaction between students and faculty and between student groups were all important factors for students to perceive and report higher educational gains. Some of these perceived gains included improvement in writing skills, developing the ability to learn on their own, clarifying their own values and understanding and getting along with others (Ethington 2000: 718). Some of her findings on student-reported gains, like developing the ability to learn

on their own, were different from those gathered in Pascarella and Terenzini's analysis. But so was the sample and approach followed in the research, since the studies in Pascarella and Terenzini's analysis included a bigger sample and were primarily conducted in 4 year-institutions. Ethington's conclusions about socialisation processes and the institutions were that the more the institutions invested in the socialisation process, the more personal growth students seemed to experience. She concluded that in Community Colleges, where students spend only two years, they may have less time to engage in a socialisation process and, therefore, they seem to report not as many gains in personal growth as students in four- year institutions. She suggested that involvement and opportunities for socialisation are also reduced in Community Colleges mostly because the types of students who attend those institutions (mature students, part-timers, commuters) do not spend as much time there. Her findings contrast somehow with Pike's (Pike at al., 2003) in that she puts more weight on the characteristics of the institutions rather than on the students' when it comes to raising the level of engagement and how that affects students' reports of educational gains. One connecting point I found in these two studies, however, is the fact that although Ethington writes more about the institutional practices promoting engagement, it is the students' characteristics and background (mature students, part-timers, adults, commuters) in the end, which play a prominent role in the way students report on their experience through college or university. So, are the characteristics of the student population or the institutional practices which create an impact on the students' positive perceptions of education or is it the complex interplay between these two factors which affect the students' positive perception of education?

In my research I worked with four-year institutions where most students have more time to socialize with other students and interact with the faculty as well as participating in different student group activities. However, there were also some students who had other social responsibilities besides the university. The socialisation patterns and perceived gains in education from these two groups of students, following Ethington's analysis, would differ since the time the mature students spend in the universities is less and their interaction with faculty and peers is reduced. According to my study, this

difference in perception of gains is expressed at a deeper level through the different ways in which they construct their identity. I argue that this socialisation experience, where institutional as well as individual differences converge, is important since it seems to affect the way students see themselves as part of the university system and in relation to 'Others'. These 'Others' could be their peers, the faculty they have contact with, and their family, employers, who could have different expectations from them according to their 'university student status'. The importance of the perceptions that these 'Others' have of them becomes an essential element in the development of their identity (Jenkins, 1996).

The changes in size and composition in university student populations are partly a result of the massification process undergone in many countries by this sector (Scott, 1998; Sadlack, 1998; Rodriguez, R., 1998, 1999; Ibarra, 2002). On one hand, this has meant bringing in more diversity and plurality to campuses through a bigger student population. On the other, it has also meant financial difficulties for both universities and students. The increase in student tuition fees as a means to ameliorate the financial situation of the institutions has been translated as tension for students. The difficulties some students may go through in order to finance their education is a relevant factor which may determine who stays and who leaves the university and may affect how much they value higher education, their decision to continue their studies as well as their expectations for their degrees. In a study in a university in England, Liz Thomas (2000) examined the way in which the values and practices of an institution impacted on the experience of students through university, specifically on the issue of retention. She wanted to find out what features or practices in the university had an influence on the student's decision to stay and how this would eventually affect their evaluation of their university experience. She found that aspects like greater diversity in the university population as well as a committed (student-friendly) policy to deal with the payment of university fees made students stay. Her findings suggested that although many students coped with poverty, high levels of debt and significant burdens of paid work, they still held on to successfully complete their courses of study, if they found the university environment friendly and supportive. In my research, the issue of students' financial

tension was also a recurrent topic and although I did not analyse a variable such as retention, I found it interesting to see how the evaluation of the university degree varied according to how students seemed to be coping with financial difficulties. In the private university (ITESM) students pay considerably higher tuition fees, this being most expensive of its kind in Latin America. Although most students at this university come from fairly well-off families, the amount they pay per semester is high enough to put them under stress. There are students who have either a partial scholarship or a loan, and for them, high tuition fees are also a concern. In the public university, the topic of financial difficulties was more predominant in the students' answers. Although their fees are not significantly high, what students have to pay still may represent an important expense for the family or for the students if they are supporting themselves. In both universities, if students need to finance their education on their own and need to have a job, the amount of time they spend on the university premises will differ and so may the type of responsibilities they acquire as employees as well as students. This may mean that the processes of socialisation and identity construction they go through may be somehow different from that of full time non-working students. Findings in my research will suggest that some of the financial tensions students go through may be linked in a significant manner to the way they write about the meaning of a university degree in their lives in the present and future. More of the connections made between these issues will be discussed in later chapters.

The focus of the different studies mentioned so far has been on effects of different types of institutions on students and their interests, and their findings have been varied. While some enquired about cognitive gains, others focused on psychological and social changes, student retention and financial matters. There have been other studies where education in general, without specific allusion to institutions, has been the focus of attention. Antikainen (1996) and a team of researchers conducted an extensive study in Finland to find out how people evaluated the influence education had had in their lives. They also investigated how their perceptions changed depending on factors like age, social status and conditions of prosperity in their country. In their study, Antikainen's team chose people from three generations to see how they evaluated education depending on their age and the dates they had been in school. Both the purpose of their

study and the methodology they used show interesting innovations, different from the type of studies reported up to now. The thematic analysis and categorisation of the data they followed in their research was particularly valuable to inform my study since they had also used biographical materials.

Following a biographical approach, they interviewed people from three different generations asking them how they valued the impact education had had in their lives. They found that, in general, the 'rating' people gave to education varied depending on the social and economic environment they had lived or were living in. They classified their answers into four groups concluding that people saw education as:

- _ Resource: education as a way to cope with difficulties (or struggle to have a better way of life);
- _ Status: a degree produces status and distinction;
- _ Conformity: education as a way to fit into the changing social environment;
- _ Individualization: students have become clients of the educational institutions and consumers of education (Antikainen et al 1996: 86-87).

They also found a correlation between the meaning people gave to education and their social class: the lower the class, the higher the evaluation. People also attached a certain feeling to their valuation, moving from a sense of nostalgia and gratefulness in older people to a sense of indifference in younger generations, as if they took for granted the fact of being educated. The findings about the relationship between social class and the value people gave to education are relevant to my study because my sample included students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, and to see how they evaluated education particularly from this perspective was of relevance in my research. Another similarity between Antikainen's study and my research were the feelings of nostalgia and of 'taken-for-granted' associated with HE expressed by students from the private and public university. Their findings have been useful in analysing how the perception people have of higher education has changed over the years and in different contexts - Finland and Mexico -, but they have at the same time revealed how this perception has retained interesting similarities.

Antikainen's study (1996) introduces into this review the study of people's lives as another area where the effect of education on identity has been studied. Studies of its kind show the gradual and progressive movement in social research towards constructivist approaches, qualitative methodology and the use of biographical materials as valuable data in research. Another interest in this kind of research seems to be the construction of subjectivity as influenced by changes in modern society and how people talk or write about it through their personal accounts. This has made biographical narratives, 'windows' to look at how the personal and the social interconnect since "in addition to describing and organising, a person also constructs and produces his³ identity" through the narrations (Antikainen 1996: 22).

Studies with biographical data have been carried out, for example, in the field of sociology since the 1920's in the Chicago School. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by Thomas and Znaniecki has been documented as "the first example of sustained sociological research in which personal documents were used as primary data" (Erben 1998: 1). In recent decades, sociologists and scholars have expressed a renewed interest in the biographical method, and education has been one of the areas where this methodology has become popular (Antikainen, 1998). This interest in the study of lives and educational issues has generated the appearance of biographical and life-course studies, new journals, articles and books as well as the creation of biography study centres (Erben, 1998). In relation to identity studies, Erben points out that the recognition of biographical studies is seen as "a way of observing in the exploration of the *narrative* features of human identity, how the structural and the interactional are intertwined" (Ibid: 1; emphasis by the author). The range of biographical work carried out in education as reported by Michael Erben (1998) includes issues like gender and vocational choices (Man: 1998), teachers' identity (Gill Clarke, 1998); learning difficulties and marginal sexual identities (Dickinson: 1998), among others. The variety in these studies shows the different angles that biographical studies can give to an educational study.

³ The sexist use of 'his' to generalise male and female is used in the original by the author and has been kept here to comply with referencing standards.

An increased popularity in qualitative methodologies in addition to the strength of emergent theoretical perspectives like feminism has brought changes to the research landscape opening new paths to study old and new topics under different perspectives. Studying university contexts and identity, biographical research has focused on different issues (racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, cultural) and different subjects (teachers, administrators and students). Warmington (2000) in the UK studied the relationships between the aspirations of students and their identity in an ACCESS program (basically oriented to returning students). He found that most students would regard their degrees as a 'passport', not only to a better economic future but also as an affirmation of a stronger, and what they saw as a 'more validating' identity. In his study the different values that students gave to their education reflected not only their personal interest in getting a better job but also the demands of a knowledge based society that seems to rate people according to their academic credentials (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). While my research focuses on undergraduate young students, there are some cases of mature students in the sample whose concerns are similar to those of the students researched by Warmington. My study, having a sample from a public and a private institution, will also allow me to see to what extent the degree is seen as a 'passport' by students from both groups. Comparing the aspirations of Warmington's students (who have had experience in the job market) with those of the undergraduate students (with little experience with jobs) could help trace the similarities and differences in the expectations they have of their degrees and the value they give to them.

Casillas (2003) writes about how in Mexico universities act as a strong centre for the construction of professional identities since "hundreds of thousands (of students)...share similar itineraries and trajectories, face common problems and structure together a series of processes of social identity constructions" (Casillas 2003:2). Students identify as adults through a socialisation process where disciplines, professions and the ideas of past and future communities of graduates integrate them and give them an identity even before they graduate. As they share similar academic and social interests, the role of the discipline, for example, could be seen as a factor in the formation of their present and future identity. The sample in my study analyses students from the science and social

science fields and the findings indicate –in general terms- that there could be some areas in the formation of their identity where belonging to a discipline may cause students to write differently about certain aspects of their identity, like how much value they give to participating in society, for example. An important observation, which I discuss in the findings chapter, is that the issue of academic discipline is also connected to that of gender. Casillas (2003) concludes that it is necessary to conduct more empirical studies to explore the ‘university’ experience in order to better understand how characteristics of the institutions (public, private, technologically oriented), students’ gender and the socioeconomic background of students make a difference in the ways students are socialised into ‘educated individuals’ in higher education. By including two types of universities and gender and disciplines, my study aims to look into these issues raised by research in the context of higher education in Mexico. The extent to which my data will allow me to reach some interpretations related to these issues is something to keep in mind as I discuss my findings. The general observation Casillas and similar studies make about the educational system is that it is still rather conservative and traditional and that it tends to ignore the diversity in its student population, applying their curricular programmes without looking at the needs and different characteristics of their students (de Garay, 2002; Casillas et al, 2001; Valle & Smith, 1993). Findings in my study start to reveal that there are still some traditional practices in the universities involved, such as hierarchical relationships between students and the academics, ‘inflexible’ curriculum, and gendered distribution of students across disciplines. What I see important to analyse is to what extent students position themselves inside these ‘traditions’; how does their participation in ‘giving continuation’ to these traditional practices talk about the types of identities they are engaging into?

In a study conducted at a Scottish university, Walker (2001) analysed students’ narratives to find out how they constructed masculine and feminine identities in an engineering department. The findings of this study reflected that the identity of the dominant group (male students) strongly influenced the identity formation of the whole group. This suggested that although efforts have been made to give women more professional opportunities in male dominated fields of study and work, there is still a strong dominance by the male side to inscribe their identity to certain areas of study

such as engineering. In my study, as I discuss in further chapters, the ‘stereotypical’ distribution of female students dominating the social sciences and male students congregating in the science departments was present in the universities studied.

Now it is important to consider how different social actors (sectors in society) are participating in the construction of the students’ identity while they are in the university. Leathwood & O’Connell (2003) explored the construction of a ‘new’ student identity in UK higher education in the context of widening participation. Their study was carried out over a three year period and it included over 600 students from low socioeconomic background. To collect the data, they used different methods and at the final stage of their research, they used focus groups and in-depth interviews in order to gather students’ experiences of their time at and post–university. Their findings about motivations to go to university and what students related to their university degree are comparable to the ones I obtained in the first stages of my research and have already published where on the individual side their degree meant a better salary, better jobs; and on the social side, it meant pride for their families, for their parents, specially if they were the first to have a university education (Rodriguez, G., 2004a & 2004b). For Leathwood & O’Connell, along with these positive feelings about their degree, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are faced with financial and emotional difficulties when they can eventually go to universities because in many respects “the organizational and academic cultures are exclusionary” (2003: 612). The argument sustained throughout their study is that the discourse of widening participation has a considerable impact in the way students are building their identity since “they do epitomize the New Labour dream of individuals with high aspirations, who take responsibility for their own learning, and who persevere against all odds (Ibid: 611). One of the interests in researching students’ accounts was to see to what extent their way of writing might reflect the discourses dominating HE. It was interesting to find intersections between the discourses from the official sources (mission statements and senior academics) and that of the students, as shall be seen in the chapter on presentation of findings. As in Leathwood & O’Connell’s study, in the analysis of the students’ accounts I wanted to find how students were interacting with the messages coming from what represents HE for them; and lastly, how much of these messages

(official discourses) they were taking and rehearsing as part of their own definitions of who they were. Through the discourse analysis conducted, I believe to have obtained not *all* the answers to these questions but *different views* of how these answers may have been formed and the possible *implications* they have for the construction of students' identity.

The impact of education on people's lives runs as a main thread along the studies mentioned so far. The relevance of the topic becomes more evident time and again as researchers keep enquiring about how people, education and its specific institutions are engaged in a multi-layered process that keeps these three elements interconnected. The approaches followed in the studies done at national level have tended to be positivistic partly due to the nature of the sample and the objectives of the research. The studies conducted more recently following qualitative methodologies, and specifically through biographical research, talk of the way in which educational research is looking for more integrative methods. The range of interests and fields of research has also been expanded including the organization of the institutions, from the nature of the students' population, to differences between public and private different systems of education as well as the students' experience through their years in university. In the cases where identity and students have been the focus of enquiry, their identities have been analysed under the lenses of developmental processes, aspirations, response to widening participation programs and gendered disciplines. In most of these cases the impact of the institution and its practices on their identity has been a central issue. My study of university students' identity shares this interest as well and is in line with the recent preoccupation in social and educational research to study the lives of individuals in a social context. The originality of my study compared to others done in a similar fashion, however, resides in three of its characteristics: the context where it has been conducted, the methodology followed and the theoretical framework applied to the design and development of the research. In terms of characteristics of the context, the sample of this study combines students from a public and a private university in Mexico, where no study of university students' identity has been conducted under these terms. Secondly, the type of methodology used, although following the guidelines of biographical research, diversifies its techniques by incorporating a new format to elicit and collect

the students' data, as will be exemplified in the methodology chapter. Thirdly, the combination of theoretical perspectives about capital, habitus and the role of agency and structure in identity formation that inform the analysis and discussion of this research and is seeking to offer a new platform from where issues of education and identity could be discussed and interpreted in the light of the findings in this study. It is to this theoretical framework that the following section is dedicated.

2.2 The institutional impact of education on the identity of individuals: theoretical framework

In order to explore how educational institutions are involved in the formation of university students' identity, I have drawn on different theories and views in the area of identity, cultural capital, social capital, habitus and discourse analysis. To analyse the concept of identity formation I have drawn on the work by Anthony Giddens (1984; 1991) and Jenkins (1996) whose theoretical orientation argues for a dialectic construction of identity. To explore the role of the educational sites in the construction of students' identity, I have used the concepts of field, habitus and cultural capital as deployed by Pierre Bourdieu; along with his concepts I have analysed my data following the notion of institutional habitus as presented by Reay et al (2001) in the analysis of institutional practices and their influences on students. In order to analyse and discuss the students' writings I have followed Foucault's (1989) argument that discourses shape and are shaped by individuals enabling them to make use of these discourses to construct a 'valid' identity. Using these concepts in my theoretical framework has been useful in seeing how their original definitions look 'face to face' with the realities of the contexts being studied. Therefore, an adherence to the original definitions shall not be always expected; but rather a discussion of their usefulness in exploring the new realities where they are being applied. Such confrontation between old concepts and new contexts may prove at times to be problematic as shall be seen in the re-working or expansion of the meaning of one of the original concepts; however, this is where part of the contributions of this study hope to be reflected.

2.2.1. The role of habitus in identity formation. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and cultural capital

In order to explore how educational institutions are involved in the formation of university students' identity, I will explore the notions of *field*, *habitus* and *cultural capital* introduced by Pierre Bourdieu. I have found these concepts useful to analyse how in the field of HE certain conditions created (and recreated) in the institutions have an impact on the way students define themselves in society: their place in the hierarchy of education, their value of their degree in the labour market, their personal values and their future participation in society. The way the students identify themselves as educated individuals in a society that highly values and rewards education influences the way they construct their identity. In the sociological debate of structure over agency, Bourdieu's theory has often been regarded as deterministic (Giddens, 1984; Shilling, 1992; Jenkins 1992;); however, in the light of other discussions, the deterministic side of it has been more related to a realistic view of how structural practices still define many of the individual choices people make in their daily lives (Grenfell & James, 1998; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In order to explore the construction of identity as a dynamic process, as is my intention in this study, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that Bourdieu's theory gives validity to the explanation of some of the effects of structural practices in education, and that these practices are also 'nurtured' by the decision of the individuals to follow them or not. Following this argument, I have emphasised students' agency as an important factor as they construct their identity in the context of higher education. In order to introduce how I have used this concept in the context of my research, I will first discuss some of the challenges found using Bourdieu's theory and how I have approached them in my study.

Bourdieu's contributions to social theory have been highly influential in the way social research has been conducted over the last 30 years. His experience as a theorist as well as an empirical researcher gave him a solid base to build his theory (Wacquant, 1989; Wainwright, 2000). He researched and wrote about a wide variety of subjects like media, art, politics, language and education. It is in this last area where his theoretical position has highlighted critical issues such as the production and dissemination of knowledge as well as the role of academia and education in the society. "Bourdieu: The

legacy”, a conference recently organized in London talked about the place his theory has in contemporary educational debates. Although his contribution to educational research is undeniable and his concepts are being widely used, the application of his theories and concepts has not gone unquestioned and criticised. The main issues pointed to by his critics are the sense of determinism found in his writings, his obscure style in writing, and the lack of consistency in the way he defined key concepts in his theory (Jenkins, 1992 and 1996; Shilling, 1992).

As mentioned above, one of the criticisms of Bourdieu is the lack of clarity in his writings which makes his terminology sometimes ‘obscure’ and difficult to understand (Jenkins 1996). This lack of clarity in Bourdieu’s texts has been discussed from different points of view. The confusion found in some English texts has been attributed to the translations of Bourdieu’s French writings (Grenfell and James, 1994) where the style differs in both languages making French sound circular and confusing against the more direct style in English. Writing about the ‘circularity’ of Bourdieu’s style, Calhoun et al. (2002: 264) write: “English-language readers who are used to a more linear style are often bothered by this, though the style will seem familiar to those who have practice reading French social theory.” Jenkins (1996) finds Bourdieu’s style of writing obscure and hard to understand, making it difficult to access even for readers familiar with the topic. These issues have posed questions not only on the readability of the writings but on the congruence of the theory itself. I found that the circular way in which he writes in French is similar to the style used in Spanish, which is less direct than in English, for example. Although some of the complexity in his writings might be due to translation issues, I have found his writings confusing at times, for example when he uses different terminology to refer to the same concept (*habitus*, for example). Some (Grenfell and James 1998) who refer to these changes in meaning as a result of evolution in his theory have a point; however even in this evolution, consistency must be maintained if it is to remain the same theory.

The lack of consistency in some of his terms made it difficult to pin down what his final definition of a concept is in order to use it in my research. A concept like *habitus*, for example, is defined sometimes from an objective point of view as a set of procedures,

paths to follow, a set of actions while others from a more subjective point of view as dispositions in the individuals (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 2002 in Calhoun et al). Sometimes its definition may show both aspects, "...is the system of structured and structuring dispositions, *the habitus*, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented toward practical functions" (Bourdieu 1990: 52). What are these dispositions? If they are objective, how can you identify them? This shifting from a subjective to an objective view creates problems when deciding which definition to use. What I have observed is that authors would use the definition that best fits into the context of their study. This, while useful as a research strategy, may be seen as an inconsistency; however, it may as well be an option to develop the concept further, as is discussed in the following paragraph.

Those who have used Bourdieu in their studies (Thomas, 2000; Reay, et al 2001; Ethington, 2000; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003) also show a diversity of uses of his concepts. While this may have led to ambiguity at times, it has also helped discover that the differences in uses have mostly emerged due to contextualisation matters. The different connotations for the concept of *habitus*, for instance, seem to account for the distinctiveness of the contexts in which it has been deployed, be it in an educational, political or medical study. This spectrum of definitions can be taken as a lack of congruency in the theory; alternatively, it can also be regarded as a way for the researchers to contextualise the concepts making them approachable and useful for their study. This in turn could develop the concepts and the theory in general as they are explored from different points of view.

The third criticism of Bourdieu's theorising is of an epistemological nature. It deals with the determinism found in the orientation of his theory. His theory of social reproduction has been immersed in countless debates as it claims to break away from a structural determinism, yet according to some authors (Shilling, 1992, Jenkins 1996; Wilmott, 1999), it fails to fully account for it and still has strong tendency to be deterministic. His assumption that in social practice, the way individuals and social structures interact reproduces the practices dictated by the dominant class, has been labelled deterministic. This view has faced challenges from those who believe in a more

dynamic way of interaction between the individuals and the social structures (Giddens, 1984; Shilling, 1992; Davies, 1994) where both have the capacity to induce changes in the other. Jenkins (1996) writes that in spite of Bourdieu's efforts to break away from determinism, writing about a reflexive sociology at the end of his career, he remains a determinist because the bases of his theory point in that direction since its beginnings. The dichotomy of what has more weight in shaping social practice, the individual or the structure, is still a live debate in our days and social theorists continue to approach it from different perspectives. More recent approaches such as the *structuration theory* by Giddens (1984) have proposed ways to play one concept against the other to find more liberating and hopeful views on social interactions.

However controversial and debatable Bourdieu's theory may seem, its impact has been invaluable to the development of social theory. The different 'readings' made of Bourdieu have enriched the debate as to what holds as valid or invalid in his theory at present. This has taken the theory further and has allowed for different perspectives to emerge, as in the case of the term institutional habitus, which departing from Bourdieu's original concept of habitus, has developed and is used in educational research (Reay et al., 2001). The complexity of Bourdieu's theory requires a close examination of his terminology as well as a better analysis of the different contexts where researchers have applied it. The fact that people engage in different discussions about what he wrote always brings the possibility of enrichment and development of his theory. It is indicative, for example, that there will be a special edition of British Journal of the Sociology of Education in 2004 dedicated to Pierre Bourdieu. In 'my reading' of Bourdieu I did not intend to reform the inconsistencies in his theory, nor clarify his uses of terminology. That would have been an extremely ambitious project, away from the purpose of my study and not fair for the original theory since it would have only become another 'reading' of Bourdieu. What I have done is take three of his concepts and use them with the definition that appeared more 'workable' and operational for the research purpose. If this again falls into one of the 'misreadings' of Bourdieu, I have run the risk. I believe his theory has a lot to offer to the understanding of social practice, especially in the educational context, and the way I have used his concepts may offer another perspective into his contribution.

2.1.1.1 The notion of Field

Pierre Bourdieu introduces the notion of field as "...a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence, and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions..." (Wacquant 1989: 39). A field is formed by a network of positions which determine the situation of its occupants, being these people or institutions. In his 'decoding' of Bourdieu, Jenkins (1996: 85) defines field as "a structured system of social positions, occupied either by individuals or institutions, the nature of which defines the situation of their occupants." This notion of field designates the space where individuals and institutions interact at micro and macro levels. It could also imply that there is a lack of freedom or capacity of agents to influence this system or network since their conditions are dictated by the positions they occupy in a certain field. This conception of field makes it appear as a dead-end street. How could this notion of field be used in my study to open a space for students' agency? Departing from Bourdieu's theory, Jenkins offers a view of a field where structures and agents interact in a struggle to appropriate the different stakes held in that field: "A field, in Bourdieu's sense, is a social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them" (1992: 84). This reading of a field is more open to include individual agency, with more possibilities of a dialectic relationship between agents and their field. Each field has its own rules and principles, its own ways of doing things (Grenfell and James 1998: 20), yet this autonomy is relative as it is always in connection with other fields. This interconnectedness is apparent within the same field of education as well as with other fields in society, such as industry, media, health, economy or politics. As fields are continuously interacting, the boundaries between them are never definite or fixed. They need this flexibility to be able to negotiate dominant/dominated positions of its agents. It is in this struggle for changing of positions that the field, still structured and structuring, ceases to have complete dominance on its agents. This is the space where agency could develop and exist.

In a further definition of field, this idea of 'struggle' plays a central part: "A field is, by definition, 'a field of struggles' in which agents' strategies are concerned with the preservation or improvement of their positions with respect to the defining capital of the field" (Jenkins 1992: 85). This definition of field gives a possibility for agents to break away from the pattern they are expected to reproduce in a given field. Since its agents are concerned with the improvement of their positions, they can act differently and negotiate their position to higher standards. This is the point where Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and the idea that the educational system perpetuates social inequalities may fail to account for 'changing of positions' of agents in a field. Perceiving higher education as a field where its agents negotiate their positions depending on what is at stake (capital or resources as we will discuss later) serves as a platform to explore the construction of students' identity as they negotiate their positions interacting within and between fields. This also allows the conception of HEIs as sites of identity construction.

2.1.1.2 What is habitus?

Habitus is another key concept from Bourdieu's theory that I have applied in my research in order to analyse the individuals and their actions within a social structure. This interaction could be given at the individual as well as at the group level. Although I found the concept useful, *habitus* is also a term that may be difficult to understand and define in practical or functional terms. Similar to the concept of *field*, the way the concept of habitus was defined and used by Bourdieu and subsequent researchers appears to include subjective and objective elements in its meaning as discussed earlier. It also involves individual and collective implications. Thus, one can talk about an individual habitus as well as a group or institutional habitus. Habitus can be translated into practices or actions as well as something that can exist in people's minds. In its traditional sense, it is a Latin word that means 'typical,' 'habitual' disposition, state or appearance. The basic definition given by Bourdieu states that habitus is "an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted" (Bourdieu 1977: 95). That is, this social system generates and approves

of those practices which are similar to its nature, ensuring its continuation. That would imply that if an action is not compatible with the characteristics of the habitus where it was produced, it would be negatively judged by those who share the habitus and would eventually be discarded. As Bourdieu argues that “the habitus is the site of the interplay between structure and practice” (Calhoun et al. 2002: 261), the concept’s definition carries subjective as well as objective connotations. First, the definition talks about a certain nature of the habitus which regulates what actions are to be reproduced and what are to be discarded. Secondly, it relates to how people (subjectively) develop the idea of common sense or truth about certain actions as they would judge them positively only when they comply with the expectations of the habitus they belong to. A third implication related to issues of structure establishes the relationship of this definition to the concept of social groups: “it is on basis of the habitus that Bourdieu defines social groups (including social classes), since those who occupy similar positions in the social structure will have the same habitus” (Calhoun, *ibid.*). As a group of actions, habitus can be understood as “this generative and unifying principle which retranslates the intrinsic and relational characteristics of a position into a unitary life style, that is, a unitary set of choices of persons, goods, and practices” (Bourdieu 2002b: 272). This double nature of habitus, although complicated in its definition, opens possibilities to identify or read the habitus of a social group through their practices and vice versa.

According to Jenkins (1992), Bourdieu attempted to clarify the concept and produced three distinct meanings and defined habitus as:

- the result of an organizing action, similar to structure.
- a way of being or habitual state
- tendency, propensity or inclination

This definition emphasises the ideas of structure and action, features which Bourdieu wanted to put together in his intention to break the dualism between the structure and the individual. Comparing habitus and field, Grenfell and James (1998: 14) equated the former with the individual’s thought and activity and the latter with the objective world. In this sense, they defined human action to be constituted by a dialectical relationship between the individual’s habitus and his or her field. This dialectical relationship

between habitus and field is in tune with the definition and approach I used in my research in order to understand the individual and structural features involved in university practices.

2.1.1.3 Habitus in higher education

In the area of education, Bourdieu defined habitus as ‘habitat’ in his work *Les Heritiers* and then as ‘medium of inculcation’ in his work on *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (Grenfell and James 1998: 15). It is these two concepts which I have found more useful in the discussion of how HEIs interact with students’ identity formation. As habitat and as medium of inculcation, a university and its practices may represent for students the habitus where their identity is constructed and transformed. As for institutional habitus, for Bourdieu (2002a: 281) “habitus is what enables the institution to attain full realization...” for it is through the habitus that institutions can be understood in the practical sense. In a similar fashion, for Reay et al. (2001: p. 1.2) “habitus can be viewed as ...the source of day to day practices.” Institutional habitus then involves an amalgam of agency and structure where an organisation serves to mediate the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour (McDonough, 1996 in Reay et al., 2001). The fact that institutional habituses are constructed over time as “a product of history, [which] produces individual and collective practices...” (Bourdieu 2002a: 276) and can be flexible and fluid (Brooks, 2003) opens the possibility of change in the position of subjects in the face of structuring factors. This possibility is an important space for the emergence of individual agency.

Considering the family as a social institution, its implications in the generation of a certain habitus which could later influence students’ ideas of education are important as well. As embodied in individuals, “habitus is acquired by individuals through experience and explicit socialisation in early life” (Jenkins 1992: 81). In the case of education, it is relevant to explore the way the habitus is being transformed as the individual interacts in more fields (work, campus life, social life, young adults). By the

time students come to the university, the habitus they acquired in their early years has already been influenced by other socialisation instances like college experiences, part-time jobs, volunteering, etc. and will continue changing as they go through university. The type of interactions experienced in the university adds up and transforms the students' habitus. This is in continuous regeneration as their interactions diversify through contact with other students, faculty and staff; and with the way the institution is organized through its different practices (in admission policies, teaching styles and assessment routines). It is by looking at education as a 'field of struggles' (Jenkins's definition cited above) and continuous interaction and regeneration of conditions that I find a space for individual agency, a possibility difficult to find in a traditional reading of Bourdieu. What I want to see in my study is how can the type of structures, ways of being, tendencies and inclinations (habitus) promoted in the field of higher education influence students' identity. What type of identity is developed along with a specific type of habitus?

2.1.1.4 Cultural capital

The next concept in Bourdieu's theory that I want to bring into this discussion is that of cultural capital. For Bourdieu, cultural capital is "the social products of a field or systems of relations through which individuals carry out social intercourse" (Grenfell and James 1998: 18). This notion of capital makes it possible to analyse what each field produces and what individuals in that field may get as an exchange for their interaction in it. In education, the exchange students get is cultural capital translated into: cultivated dispositions (verbal facility, aesthetic tastes, and academic credentials); material objects like books, machines requiring specialized knowledge to be appropriated (materially and symbolically) and institutional access such as universities, facilities for learning, libraries. All this will serve as a 'token,' something students may later exchange for other 'goods' in different fields, "so, for example, high academic qualifications traditionally tend to 'buy' good jobs with good salaries" (Grenfell and James 1998: 21).

The point Bourdieu makes about cultural capital and education is that not everyone goes into the field with the same amount of capital and that the educational system perpetuates this inequality by supporting those who enter the field better prepared with more capital. Following this reasoning, those students with less cultural capital would have less chance of success in universities since the educational system practices, such as specialized use of language by teachers, admission and examination procedures, would hinder the students' progress and ultimately their chance to obtain a university degree.

The above position raises the question of determinism often associated with Bourdieu's theory since individuals seem to be condemned to remain in the same social position (class) all their life. It also marginalizes the possibility of individual agency. One argument against this idea of Bourdieu is that ideologies and cultures are not only *reproduced* in schools but also *produced* there (Apple, 1980; MacDonald, 1980 cited in Moore, n.d.; emphasis from original). In this respect, I have re-examined two particular points in Bourdieu's theory where I suggest there is room for individual agency and used them to analyse the interaction between students and the universities.

The first point is found in Bourdieu's response to accusations of determinism in his theory (Jenkins 1992: 82-83). Bourdieu pointed out that habitus could change if the circumstances that constituted it changed. This leads to a possibility of change in action; a change in the way an individual would be expected to act according to a certain habitus. The second point is his explanation of the relationship between social actors and structure. He argues that an important dynamic in this relationship is the ability for individual actors to invent and improvise within the structure of their routines (Grenfell and James, 1998). Thus, the possibility of invention and improvisation allows for creativity; the possibility in the change of habitus opens alternatives for individual agency. In his emphasis to examine how people perceive the world, Bourdieu did not want to neglect the influence of structures in these perceptions of the world. In my opinion, his insistence on the power of social reproduction practices may have obscured the possibilities of agency that can be found in his own writings. For instance, in his concept of cultural and social capital which imply whatever resources people may have

or amass and then use to try to expand or compensate for lack of other type of capital like economical wealth, for example.

2.3 Social capital and university education

The reason why I decided to include the topic of social capital and university in this chapter is because I want to discuss how this was reflected in my study through the students' responses. At the beginning of my research, only Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital was planned; however, as the findings unfolded, it was necessary to develop the point of social capital further and include other notions which would reflect more closely what the findings have suggested about how social capital has become a major interest in students' identity.

The concept of social capital has been widely used in different fields of study such as health, social work and politics. In the area of education, according to Mark Smith (2001) the term social capital was firstly coined by Lyda Judson Hanifans in 1916 in a study of rural schools' community centres where he was interested in finding out indicators of fellowship and sympathy among members of those centres. Later on, James Coleman (1998) explored the concept as well in his studies of the interrelations between social capital and human capital and the social contexts of education. His study about educational attainment indicated that both types of capitals - social and cultural - were needed for students to obtain better results, underlining the value of social relationships in the increase of cultural capital

In social theory, Pierre Bourdieu used the term of social capital in conjunction with that of cultural capital in analysing the reproductive aspect of education in a meritocratic society (Bourdieu, 1990; Grenfell & James 1998). In relation to education and academic degrees, Robert Putnam (2003) declared in a recent interview (<http://www.muyinteresante.es>) that in some cases, a good agenda full of contacts was better than a good academic degree, "Tener buenos contactos vale más que un título académico" (To have good contacts is better than having an academic degree - own

translation). His idea was to underline the value of social relations as something that, although it may be intangible, has effects on people and may bring benefits. Social capital has been defined in different ways; however, they all contain the idea that it is based on people's relationships and social interactions. Coleman (1998) defined social capital as something that involves people's relationships and can be used as a resource. He identified the dynamic nature of this concept by saying it is not fixed nor tangible but present in different ways depending on its function. Coleman makes a distinction between different forms of social capital. The form that relates more to education is that of information channels and Coleman cites a university as a place where social capital is maintained by colleagues sharing ideas and information (Schuller, 2004). "An important form of social capital is the potential of information that inheres in social relations" (Ibid 88:S104) and the university is a place where these relations would be strong. In my study this is an aspect that is highly emphasised by students as they gave socialising a high rate in enjoyment and future networking, as well as support in the absence of family, for example.

In the notions adopted by the World Bank, social capital is said to work through multiple channels and the first one mentioned is that related to information and educational contexts, among others. "Information flows (e.g. learning about jobs, learning about candidates running for office, exchanging ideas at college, etc.) depend on social capital" (<http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital>). The World Bank sees social capital both as a critical input as well as a valuable by-product of education and considers that education produces social capital in three fundamental ways: students practise social capital skills, such as participation and reciprocity; schools provide forums for community activity and through civil education students learn how to participate responsibly in their society. In the context of my study, it is clear that through university students build these forms of social capital, one that helps them use their university classmates as 'connections' and the other promoted by the university as the institution tries to engage them in social participation.

2.4 The debate between social structure and human agency

The position of structure and human agency in the analysis of social life found in Bourdieu's theory is not a novelty in social research. It has been a never-ending debate among social theorists (Shilling, 1992; Archer, 1995) and some have seen it as impossible: "the debate of what came first or what determines the other, either the actor the structure or vice versa is not only very old, but also unsolvable" (Wegerich 2001: 8). In educational research, according to some authors questions about agency and structure are to continue and yet authors see it as a problem with no practical solution (McFaden, 1995; Abraham, 1994 cited in Willmot 1999: 5).

From structuralist to postmodernist theories there have been different attempts to overcome the duality between these two concepts. In theoretical approaches to see the effects of change in institutions, for example, Wegerich (2001:8) proposes a 'workable' approach where "both actor and structure are influencing each other; therefore an analysis would have to be actor and structure specific in a time and a spatial framework." Although the author sees the possibilities to analyze social action following this approach as tempting, he also acknowledges that due to the 'fluidity' and complexity of the interaction "it would be difficult to identify the boundary between actor and structure." The sense of determinacy connected to Bourdieu's theory is due to this difficulty in seeing in his analysis of social practices where the structural forces yield for individual agency, if they do. His notion of a 'changeable' habitus produced through historical circumstances could be an example of this 'space for agency'; however, the emphasis on the power of the structures allows little room to recover the value and power of agency. To research how students could have a role in constructing their identity in a university habitus, I believe it is necessary to rely on notions of a habitus of a 'fluid and changing' nature where both actors and structure have a role and individual agency is part of their interactions. Hajer's model for studying institutions and individuals best captures this idea (1995: 58 cited in Wegerich 2001) by considering that "social action originates in human agency of clever, creative human beings but in a context of social structures of various sorts that both enable and constrain their agency."

In order to analyze how students construct their identity as they interact with the practices and ideologies in higher education, it is therefore necessary to acknowledge the power of the social structures in establishing limits but also in enabling human agency. Anthony Giddens in his *structuration theory* has proposed a reconceptualisation of the term of agency as a suitable solution to see structure and agency in a more dialectical interaction. His proposed theory occupies the next section of this chapter.

2.5 Reconceptualising agency: Giddens's structuration theory

Anthony Giddens in his structuration theory puts forward a view of agency and structure as interrelated elements (Giddens, 1994). The core of his theory aims to reconceptualise traditional notions of structure and agency looking at how they interact in a given situation by co-acting, rather than by excluding each other (Shilling, 1992). The attractive part of Giddens' theory is his concept of the individual as capable of agency, and structures made up of rules and resources that the individual can make use of in situations of interaction and communication (Shilling, *ibid.*). His concept of agency implies that a person can decide upon acting or not. "This conception of the agent ties agency to power" (Loyal & Barnes 2001: 513) and it presents an actor as someone capable of struggling against the status quo and its constituent routines. This concept of agency stresses the identification of agents as possessors of capacities with which they can choose to intervene. It is this concept of agency that I have taken up in my study. Although Giddens' theory of agency suffers from criticisms mainly for putting too much emphasis on the individual's choice (Jenkins, 1996) or for being inadequate in explaining how agency and structure can act in conjunction as well as on their own (Loyal & Barnes, 2001), it still holds to the commitment of putting human agency as the centre of the discussion and this makes it a strong argument for agency-directed analyses.

Giddens's theory is supposed to differ from Bourdieu's in the way they perceive structure and agents. While both try to break away from the dualism involved, I still find that both authors share assumptions when they talk about how social life is

organized through structures (Bourdieu) and structuring principles (Giddens); how individuals repeat actions and engage in routinary practices in one case to reproduce society (Bourdieu) and in the other to have a sense of security in their lives (Giddens). What is apparent here is that neither can get away from the structure-agency dilemma and that neglecting either of these concepts has subjected their models to hard criticism. Nevertheless, following Jenkins idea, Bourdieu and Giddens "... are both good to think with" and the questions about the dilemmatic agency-structure duet continue to be a rich area of research.

In my study, this is how I have used the different concepts I borrowed from both Bourdieu and Giddens. I have used the concept of institutional habitus to analyse how practices and characteristics of structural nature in HEIs influence the way students see themselves in relation to education. My belief is however that this influence is reciprocal and that students also influence institutions' habituses. It is important to point out that structures are dependent on agents for their continuation. Their development and consolidation rely on a dynamic relation between them and the agents' decisions to keep them. In the institution/students equation, I am arguing for a positioning of students as agents, able to recognize their capability of action as part of the structure of an educational field. This is where Giddens's theory of agency enables analysis of to what extent in my study students' answers show possibilities for agency, their capability to decide upon taking action or not, since "the attraction of structuration theory undoubtedly lies in its emphasis upon human agency..." (Wilmott 1999: 6). I have found the combination of concepts (institutional habitus and students' agency) useful to explore and to reflect upon my data, and to see how they can be deployed in different ways when they are applied to educational research. I realize that much more needs to be done in the area of social theory as conceptions of human agency and social organization are deployed in different research contexts. In a way, my study aims to contribute to this continuous search.

2.6 Identity construction in Giddens's structuration theory

Another 'attraction' as Wilmott (1999) puts it, of the work of Giddens is his conceptualisation of identity which becomes crucial in a study like mine that is trying to find how institutional habitus (structures) may influence the way students construct (agency) their identity. His model of identity works around these two issues and is deployed in a context where the conditions of living are affected by modernity. Referring to modernity and identity in relation to institutions, Giddens identifies in modernity "the emergence of new mechanisms of self-identity which are shaped by - yet also shape - the institutions of modernity" (Giddens 1991: 2) thus underlining the reciprocal influence between the individuals and the institutions. A key issue in Giddens's notion of self-identity is that "the self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences" (1991: 2); it is not fixed but continuously rearranged depending on the circumstances individuals are going through.

This notion of malleability of identity is also supported by most recent studies on identity and stays in contrast with the idea that identity was fixed, imposed and unchangeable. Debates on this matter have come from studies on identity on the grounds of race and ethnicity (Hall, 1990), social movements (Castells, 1997); social representation (Howarth, 2001); and are strongly contested through feminist theory (Walker, 2001; Archer, 1995; Anderson and Williams, 2001). All these studies stay in tune with the notion of identity as something that is not fixed but something that is formed or constructed through a process of exchanges between the social and the individual world. The changes in conceptions of identity relate to the changes in the way social research is done and reflect what areas of identity have emerged as important due to shifts in subject of attention as was the case of feminist theory and ethnicity studies, for example. This evolution in the concept also responds to Howarth's claim (2001: 145) that "identity theorists must keep a pace of the changing nature of our social environments and ascertain whether or not our theories can account for the changing

nature of identity.” In the area of education, the concept of identity has also been explored under the same argument of ‘flexibility’ and underlining the social construction of its character (refer to section 2.1). For the purpose of my study I have followed the argument that identity is a socially constructed notion where the individual and the social elements meet and interact to give it a sense of validity (acceptance by the individual and by Others). As I have used biographical accounts in order to explore identity construction, I found Giddens’s definition of self-identity suitable since he asserts that “the reflexive project of the self...consists of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” and that “each of us not only ‘has’ but *lives* a biography” (Giddens 1991: 4-5).

This notion of ‘reflexivity’ pervasive in Giddens’s work refers to the fact that individuals need to be making decisions about who they are, what they should eat, wear and say in order to create a particular *lifestyle* of their own which becomes a crucial element in defining who they are (construction of their identity). One of the criticisms to Giddens’s theory is that in his interest in highlighting agency, he underestimates or even neglects the effect that social structures can have on individuals (Jenkins, 1996) and that the idea of ‘creating a lifestyle’ may be *an option* for only those who have *the options*. To the criticism of choices, Giddens (1991: 6) clarifies that the idea of choices has not only implications for those with the material resources, for “‘Lifestyle’ refers also to decisions taken and courses of action followed under conditions of severe material constraint.” In this sense, the notion of lifestyle as a set of decisions or actions taken regardless of material wealth would apply to everyone. In the context of my study, the decisions and actions taken by students in the university constitute an important element in the process of identity construction they are building around the different meanings they give to education, meanings which were my main target of analysis in the biographical accounts. As to the overemphasis on the individual over the structures, Giddens outlines his theory of structuration (1991) on the basis that to understand social practices one needs to be aware of the existence of ‘structuring forces’ which direct the individuals’ actions and which through habitual execution comes to provide a sense of security for them (ontological security). As I previously discussed in section 2.4, this explanation of Giddens about the ‘structuring’ structures has a lot in

common with Bourdieu's social structures. That is one reason at least, why both theories cannot be seen as completely different from one another. What is interesting to see is how in the search and debate for the 'ideal' theory, both theories have been proposed as an alternative to the other (Ritzer, 2003; Shilling, 1992). In the context of my study I have found Giddens's concept of identity and its construction helpful to identify the ways in which students exercise their choices when writing what education at university means for them; they have also chosen what to say about it and how. I have also acknowledged the fact that structure and its 'structuring' practices can have an effect in the way these choices are made and that these choices have sometimes been determined by differences in resources available in the habitus. Therefore, by eclectically choosing from both theories and in the light of the studies done before deploying using some of these concepts, I have managed to elaborate a theoretical framework which may have its flaws but that has been useful in interpreting my results and answering my research questions.

After 'constructing' my theoretical platform, how were these questions explored in the students' accounts? Retaking my initial research aim to find out the meanings students gave to higher education and how this could be implicated in the formation of their educational, I decided to analyse the different discourses surrounding HE. By analysing the private (from the students' accounts) and public (or official from the senior academics and the institutional mission statements) discourses, I wanted to find out the types of identity they were portraying. In order to do this, I decided to collect data from three different sources: the students, senior academics (head of departments) and documentary sources so I could have an 'image' of the meanings circulating through their discourses and the types of identities these seem to suggest. A detailed description of the methodology I used to do collect and analyse the data generated is described in the following chapter.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

In qualitative enquiry, initial questions for research often come from real-world observations, dilemmas, and questions and have emerged from the interplay of the researcher's direct experience, tacit theories, and growing scholarly interests (Marshall and Rossman 1995:16).

The initial questions for my research sprung up from my experience in teaching university students and working for two types of universities, a public and a private one. The way students seemed to have an image of themselves depending on the type of university they attended as well as how they showed this “way of seeing themselves” throughout university days and after graduating always struck me as interesting. Working for both systems of education gave me the opportunity to see some of the apparent differences and similarities between both groups of students. This is how I came to two the central questions in my study: How do university students develop, create, and in a word, construct their identity departing from the meanings they attach to higher education, and how are Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) involved in this? In order to answer the questions that motivated my research, I decided to follow a constructivist/interpretive model.

3.1 The constructivist/interpretive approach to social research

In designing a piece of research, “models provide an overall framework for how we look at reality” (Silverman 2000: 77) telling us what the ontology and epistemology of the reality we are trying to study are. In order to construct the theory, the researcher needs to identify what it is that constitutes the social reality (ontology) and what counts as evidence of that reality (Mason, 1996). The ontological perspective in this study considers people as social actors, and the process in their social interactions, dialectical.

The epistemological position, consequently, looks at their discursive constructions as evidence of how these interactions happen. As I will argue later on, the biographical approach offered suitable possibilities to explore such interactions. The way in which my social actors (students) interact and construct their identity in the university could also be influential in the way this institution creates its own identity. Both the students' and the institution's identity seem to exercise a significant influence on each other. This shows the dialectical and dynamic side of the interactions. A study of the way students wrote about what HE meant for them might throw light on how they construct their educational identity as part of this institution. At the same time, analysing what senior academics and the mission statements say about the type of students they expect to produce, might bring insights as to how the institutional and the students' discourse in this respect might overlap or differ.

Sarantakos's (1994) definition of social and interpretive research was helpful in defining my model for research. He states that social research may help evaluate the status of some social issues and their effect in society plus opening a space for grounded criticism of social reality. Interpretive social research is interested in understanding people and when done in educational contexts, it can be a form of qualified opinion on the issue studied. Finding out how students create their identity inside an institution like a university could give way to a wider understanding of the role of this institution in the society and provide a more critical view of it. As to what HE means for students, "interpretive theorists, believe reality is not 'out there' but in the minds of people, reality is internally experienced, is socially constructed through interaction and interpreted through the actors, and is based on the definition people attach to it" (Sarantakos 1994: 34). What was in the mind of university students when they thought about university education? What did they associate with it? Additionally, what about the academics' point of view about HE and about the students? In trying to answer these questions, I ascribed to Sarantakos' views that interpretive scientists try to find out the systems of meanings that actors use to make sense of their world. It is their task to unravel the ways and systems people use to understand the social reality they are actively participating in every day (Ibid: 1994). In order to explore these questions and

issues, the methodology I followed to collect and analyse the data in this study was predominantly qualitative.

3.2 Qualitative methodology

In a research project, the choice of the theories as well as the methodology must consider theoretical as well as practical issues since “even when we decide to use qualitative and /or quantitative methods, we involve ourselves in theoretical as well as methodological decisions” (Silverman 2000: 85). These decisions, in turn, have to do with the way we think the world is constructed and the way in which we think our subjects of study think about things (ontology and epistemology). A congruent link between theory and methodology is always intended in a good piece of research; however, as Silverman argues, “like theories, methodologies cannot be true or false, only more or less useful” (Silverman 2000: 79). This is a concept that guided my choice of methods.

For my study, a qualitative methodology offered the principles and techniques that seemed to better support the type of research I wanted to conduct. Firstly, it is based on a philosophy that tries to find out how the social world is interpreted, constructed, or produced (Mason, 1996). These objectives in particular were crucial in my enquiry about identity construction. Secondly, compared to quantitative analyses, in qualitative methodology the methods of data collection are more flexible and sensitive to the context where they are applied. Miles and Huberman (1994:91) point out: “qualitative research is usually focused on the words and actions of people that occur in a specific context. Most qualitative researchers believe that a person’s behaviour has to be understood in context and that context cannot be ignored or held constant.” My context was Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and I wanted to sample two specific groups, private and public university students. Having the flexibility to adapt my methodology to the context by using a new technique for data collection was important for my study as well. Third, as I had an interest in finding out how students wrote about HE and its impact on their lives, a qualitative analysis could offer a more holistic approach to the data. As Strauss and Corbin (1990:17) state: “qualitative research ...refers to research

about individual's live, stories, behaviour" and as it "studies the phenomena within their natural environment" it offers the possibility of "an in-depth and holistic understanding of the implicit and explicit aspects involved with a phenomenon." The philosophical stand of qualitative research, which says that the world need to be studied and interpreted as socially constructed as well as the flexible and holistic characteristics of its methodology, were good indicators that a qualitative approach was the path to follow in order to answer the research questions in my study. Since my research interests were focused on how the students connected HE to their lives, I decided to follow a biographical approach that would allow me to explore through the students' writings the individual definitions students had about themselves in relation to the meanings they gave to education and how that could relate to wider social issues that students. The use of this approach in educational studies is the topic of the following section.

3.3 The 'biographical turn' in research

Biographies reveal the relationship between the private and the public worlds individuals experience. The recording of these two structures in a personal document is the hallmark of the biographical method (Merrill 2002: 4).

In qualitative research, biographical methods have been widely used (Sarantakos, 1994); however, it was not until the last fifteen years that biographical research has been regarded more seriously as a method. As more emphasis was placed onto biographies and collection of life stories, biographical accounts began to be seen as points of research and discussion and not merely as a complementary technique. Sociologists and anthropologists gained interest in the production and analysis of lives and enriched the lines of inquiry into "the relationship between social processes and personal lives" (Coffey & Atkinson 1996: 75). In social research, this change was registered as the 'biographical turn' (Roberts, 2002).

One of the areas where biographical research has been fruitful is education (Erben, 1998; Merrill, 2002; Roberts, 2002). Covering topics like schooling experiences, teachers' careers and lives "the biographical or narrative turn has had an impact on the ways in which educational experiences, processes and policies are researched and understood" (Coffey, 2001: 6). The classroom, the school structure, teachers' experience in the educational systems and students' academic achievement, for example, have for long been the focus of study, so that "it would appear that the telling of a story about a life has become an important aspect of practice and research in professional teaching and other settings" (Riessman, 1993: 5-6 cited in Roberts 2002: 23). The term biographical research is used to refer not only to one approach to research but rather to a different range of similar approaches whose main field of study is 'lives.' As Roberts (2002: 1) puts it: "Biographical research is an exciting, stimulating and fast-moving field which seeks to understand the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important and how to provide interpretation of the account they give of their past, present and future." This is the concept that guided the methodology which I used to collect and analyse the students' accounts in my study.

In my interest to explore students' identity and the interrelation of this with their educational experience, using a biographical account sounded promising. "As well as documenting individual lives and identities, the biographical turn in sociological enquiry provides a strategy for exploring personal histories and biographies, as well as the relationships between structure and agency in contemporary society" (Coffey, 2001: 54). Using this approach could open a window to try to see how students constructed their identity as they went through university. Looking through their biographical writings could be helpful in finding out what role education had in their lives and how they related it to other personal issues. In this respect, biographical research could help "reveal and understand the 'personal' and its interlinking with the immediate and wider social context and political practices" (Roberts, 2002: 31). The way students wrote about their experience in HE could also reflect how they were experiencing their interaction in other social spheres, like their insertion in the job market and their participation in activities to promote development of their communities, etc. Trying to

find the connections between the meanings students gave to education and the way these meanings were important in the formation of their identity, the biographical method was enlightening. Sarantakos (1994: 209) best describes the purpose of its application in his description of biographical methods: “In the context of qualitative research, biographical methods attempt to present a perception of the self and the world from the viewpoint of the author of the biography.” On one hand, you could see, through the students’ pieces of writing, how they read the world around them, their perception of reality. On the other hand, it could also offer some insights into how the social environment, of which the university and they were part, could influence their opinions. In the view of Duff (2002: 293), at a micro level, university contexts may illustrate “the changing discourse surrounding...education taking place at the micro-societal level.” How would the biographical material collected give me the connections I was looking for between education and identity? How could biographies and identities be related? The next section attempts to answer these questions.

3.3.1 Biographies and identities in modernity

Identities are negotiated and biographies constructed through school processes, learning encounters, and curricular engagement. In turn, the articulation and representation of selves in educational settings can be challenged, changed, resisted or accepted (Coffey 2001: 53).

The relationship between biographical research and identity is important since most debates on the condition of identity construction in our times are developed in the field of abstract theory (Roberts, 2002). Therefore, a study on identity that explored the ‘lived lives’ through empirical study became appropriate and relevant. Studying how identities are constructed through biographical accounts opens up a space for insights into different factors that may participate in identity formation (Giddens, 1991). These factors may include organizations and other social structures like youth and gender groups. In modern societies, identity construction involves a process of individualization where people elaborate an individual understanding of what happens around them (reflexive identity) and internalise it to make it part of their identity

(Giddens 1991; Castells, 1997). In investigating the construction of the students' identity, it was relevant to analyze not only what students wrote but also the opinions of the senior academics and the messages in the mission statements of the universities. These last two sources were also important in the study since they may exert some influence in the way in which students build their identities (relevance of institutional habitus: Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Reay et al 2001; Thomas, 2000). In order to contextualize the use of the biographical approach, I will describe the different methods I used in order to capture the discourses of the different sources of data I used in this study: undergraduate students, heads of academic departments and mission statements of the universities.

3. 4 Research methods

The three methods I used to collect the data for this study were a type of biographical account, semi-structured interviews and documentary sources. The decision to use these three sources came from my interest in seeing how the three different sources of discourse were 'talking' about the students' identity and its construction through education. An added benefit for this decision became evident later on as the possibility of the triangulation of method added to the validity in the study (see section 3.8).

The order in the presentation of methods in this chapter reflects the relevance and weight each one had in reaching the purposes of the study, from the collection to the analysis of data. That is, since my central interest was to have access to the meanings they gave to education, I needed to study their discourse. In this way, the amount of data gathered through the biographical accounts was larger and the analysis of such data was given predominance over that from the other two sources. My criteria to do this was that while I wanted to explore more in detail what the students discourse contained, I also wanted to include the other discourses surrounding HE. For as Fairclough's (2003) notion of intertextuality states, text discourses are not produced in isolation, but in direct

relation to other texts surrounding them. These discourses will not only provide more angles to the view of HE but could serve as a 'background' to discuss what I found in the students' accounts compared to what the other discourses presented. This criterion is also highlighted in the section of theoretical sampling (section 3.5) when I talk about the characteristics of the sample and the decisions involved in its choice.

The next section starts describing the method used to collect the students' data, the largest amount of data in this study, which was a type of biographical account.

3.4.1 Educational biographical account

The method used to collect the students' accounts is what I called an *educational biographical account*. It embraces the concept of biographical research by focusing on one aspect of the students' lives; their university education. Another characteristic of this method that places it within the biographical research paradigm is the content of the students' writings: "accounts may be personal records of the events we experience in our day-to-day lives, our conversations...entries in diaries. Accounts serve to explain our past, present and future oriented actions" (Cohen et al 2000: 294). Although the format of the accounts the students wrote does not follow the traditional format of a full story of their lives in chronological order, students did seem to draw from their experiences in education, present and past, as well as projecting their hopes of a better future as they wrote them. This combination of 'time signals' is a feature commonly found in biographical accounts (Ibid). As the material relevant to study in the field of biographical research varies, in the context of this research I will use the definition of biographical research favoured by Roberts (2002: 3) where the term is used "to denote work which uses stories of individuals and other 'personal materials' to understand the individual life within its social context." The type of accounts students produced for my research fall within the category of 'personal materials.'

The *educational biographical account* (Rodriguez, G., 2004) combines an information eliciting activity (word association) followed by a written account of the words chosen

where students explained the personal meanings they give to those words. The word association technique comes from my experience in foreign language teaching (English and Spanish) where I had extensively used it to elicit vocabulary in writing and conversation classes. In the universities where I did the study, this technique was predominately used to teach information analysis and composition classes (Kabalen & Sanchez: 1998). Social psychology and mental health studies have used a similar technique in the so-called projective methods (Sarantakos, 1994: 209; Kitwood, 1997 in Cohen et al 2000: 295). In the area of ethnoscience and cultural anthropology accounts of this type were proposed in an attempt to avoid the imposition of the ethnographer on the respondents (Roberston & Beasley, 2004).

My decision to use this technique was partly guided by concepts in grounded theory where the topics could 'emerge' from the participants' views rather than by the researcher's agenda (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). I found it more relevant to see what the students would write about how they valued HE departing from their own ideas, rather than by following 'prompts' to direct their writings. I wanted to see what meanings they connected to higher education and this eliciting technique seemed to be a less intrusive way to do it. The following diagram illustrates the format of the educational biographical account. The first one shows the original version of the account as it was applied to the students. The second one is the English translation of it. A completed form is included in appendix 1.

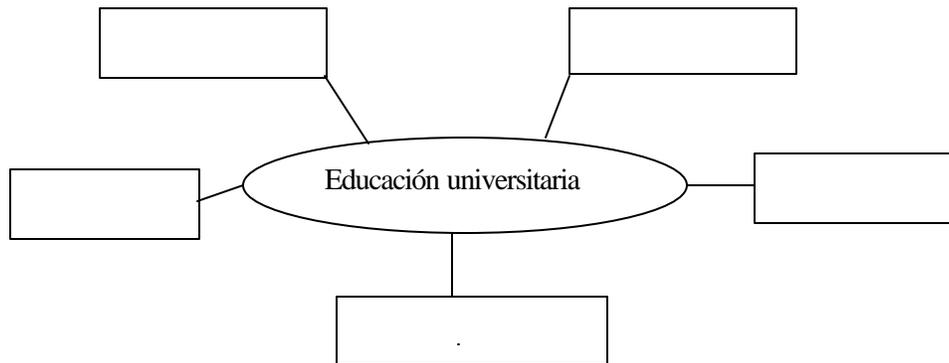
UANL ____ ITESM ____ Masc. ____ Fem. ____ Edad ____ Semestre ____

Carrera _____ Estudiante Local ____ Foráneo _____

¿De qué ciudad y Estado eres? _____

¿Cómo podría comunicarme contigo si fuera necesario? _____

1. Escribe cinco palabras que relaciones con la educación universitaria:



2. En el siguiente, escribe de qué manera estas palabras están relacionadas con tu vida. Si necesita más espacio, puedes usar el reverso de esta hoja. Gracias por tu colaboración. Si deseas comunicarte conmigo puedes enviarme un correo electrónico a Lupita.Rodriguez@tiscali.co.uk

English version

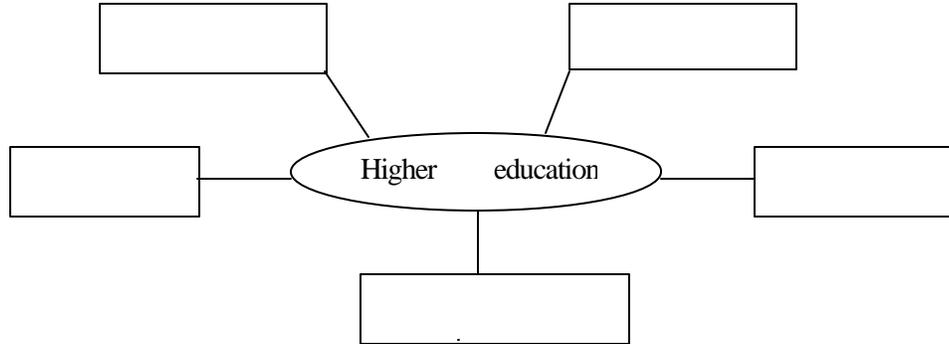
UANL ____ ITESM ____ Masc. ____ Fem. ____ Age ____ Semester ____

Field of study _____ Localization: Local ____ Foreign ____

What city and State you are from _____

How could I contact you if necessary? _____

1. Write down five words that you relate with higher education



2. In the lines below, write down in which way these words relate to your life. If you need more space, you can use the back of the page. Thanks for your collaboration. If you want to contact me, please send me an email to: Lupita.Rodriguez@tiscali.co.uk

3.4.2 Interviews

It is estimated that 90% of all social science investigations use interviews as their main or secondary data collection technique making of our society what Silverman calls an “interview society” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). From TV programmes to talk shows and polls, interviewers rely on this technique to gain access to what others think, criticise, praise, believe in or deny. The use of interviews in qualitative social research complies with different criteria that emerge from the theoretical background behind a qualitative study. The decision to use them and the evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses depends on the research paradigm they are judged under and eventually, on

how the researcher is planning to use them in the actual study. As Silverman (2000: 79) notes, interviews “are more or less useful, depending on their fit with the theories and methodologies being used and the hypothesis being tested and/or the topic that is selected.”

Having an ontological position which suggests that people’s knowledge, views and understandings are meaningful properties of the social reality, and an epistemological stand which sees interacting with people as a legitimate way to gain access to knowledge, qualitative interviewing seemed a valid way to conduct my enquiries with the academic heads of department (Mason, 1996). In terms of situating the research in the social context that was relevant to my study the interview would “enable the participants - be they interviewers or interviewees - to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their point of view” (Cohen et al 2000: 267). Another argument for using qualitative interviews finds echo in the thought of Ross (2001) as she describes the nature of qualitative data as being semi or unstructured and one that should be considered in context. In her perception of methods for data collection, she sees them as flexible and non-directive, as well as encouraging the expression of new ideas, another feature of the methodology that matched my criteria. By interviewing academic heads of departments, I was hoping to get another angle of the image which universities have about students such as their characteristics, expectations, present and future profile. When used as a secondary method, interviews can help validate other methods as well as to go deeper in certain areas of the proposed research (Cohen et al, 2000). In comparing what the senior academics said with what the students and the official documents stated about the role (and meaning) of HE in the students’ lives, I was looking for areas where their discourses could overlap or diverge.

As to the type of interview to conduct, Robson (1993: 230) writes that “a commonly made distinction is based on the degree of structure and formality of the interview” and the spectrum goes from fully structured, semi-structured and unstructured, to completely informal interviews. For the purpose of my study, I have followed a semi-structured or semi-guided interview (Ross, 2001) where I designed a set of questions

that served as a guide during the interviews. In the interest of reliability, these questions were the same for all interviews; however, the flow of the 'talk' in each case dictated the order to follow. This gave the interview a feeling of conversation and interaction, a point highly recommended in qualitative research (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). These are the steps I followed to conduct the interview and some of the questions I used. The full guide for the interview can be seen in appendix 2.

Step 1. Introducing the research: Guide questions

- _ Introduce myself
- _ Ask the interviewee if it is OK to record the interview.
- _ State the purpose of your research.
- _ Mention issues of confidentiality.
- _ Describe the number of topics to cover in the interview and their length.
- _ Ask the interviewee if there are any questions.

Step 2. Start topic areas for the interview:

Topic area 1: Role of HEIs in society nowadays

Guide question: What is your opinion about the role of the HEIs in our days ?

Topic area 2: Relevant changes in the institution

Guide question: What changes have been made in the institution lately and what criteria have they followed to make those changes?

Topic area 3 Perception of students from an academic point of view

Guide questions: What is your perception of students? To what extent do you see students involved or committed to their education, their community?

Topic area 4 Profile of the institution's graduates

Guide questions: What is the type of students your institution is trying to produce? What is the profile of a TEC/UANL student?

Step 3. Ending the interview

- _ Thank the interviewees for their time .

-Talk about possible date of publication of results of the research.

This conversational tone in interviews, termed as active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; Silverman, 2000), relies on interaction as a key factor that contributes interesting ideas not only to the data collection process but also to the data analysis. The interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee is seen as a source of knowledge, a knowledge constructed through the interview. “Treating interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge is constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not merely a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but instead a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge itself” (Holstein & Gubrium 1997: 114). This notion derives from a constructivist approach to social research where both the *what* and the *how* of knowledge production is a matter of interest and study. In this way, advocating active interviewing in my study was justified since I was interested in seeing how the interviewees constructed their answers as the interview unfolded.

There is another aspect of active interviewing that was suitable for my study and this is its positioning of the subject interviewed. Traditional approaches saw the subjects as repositories of answers, as passive subjects in the interview equation (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997; Cohen et al, 2000). This is no longer valid in an interactionist approach like the one I intended to follow in my research. Under the active interviewing scope, both subjects in the equation are seen as engaged in the production of knowledge since “the image of the *active interview* transforms the subject behind the respondent from a repository of opinions and reasons or a wellspring of emotions into a productive source of knowledge” (Holstein and Gubrium 1997: 121; emphasis in original). I wanted my interviewees to actively participate in the interview along with me. This was one of the reasons why I structured the interview in a way that only probes or prompts were given to guide our conversation. I was interested in seeing how their answers were building up a story of who they were and how they showed this through the interview:

“...the consciously active interviewer intentionally provokes responses by indicating –even suggesting- narrative positions, resources, orientations and precedents. In the broadest sense, the interviewer attempts to activate the respondents’ stock of knowledge (Schutz, 1967)

and bring it to bear on the discussion at hand in ways that are appropriate to the research agenda” (Holstein and Gubrium 1997:123).

This last feature of active interviewing taps into another issue I was concerned with as I was planning my methodology: the researcher’s reflexivity. Engaging in a more dynamic type of interview would help me reflect on my role as interviewer and researcher. By using a guide for my interview, I could follow what the respondents said and reflecting on their answers, be able to give sequence to the interview. It pushed me to be more aware of the different stages the interviews went through and how I was dealing with ‘surprises’ during the interviews like interruptions, long answers deviating from the topic, noisy environments, among others. As stated before, in choosing interviews as part of my data collection methodology, I tried to find a technique that would closely relate to the constructivist orientation of my research. On these grounds, a semi-structured interview helped me obtain the type of information I needed to analyse the senior academics’ discourse. This type of methodology, like most others, has benefits and disadvantages when applied to real contexts. However, its strengths for the research I carried and the purposes I had in mind, were positively evaluated. The challenges it posed in terms of its practicality and ethics are discussed in the last section of this chapter. An example of the guide I elaborated to conduct these interviews is included in appendix 2.

3.4.3 Documents

Documents were the third source of data I included in my research. “The analysis of documentary sources is a major method of social research, and one which many qualitative researchers see as meaningful and appropriate in the context of their research strategy” (Mason 1996: 71). The documents I used for my analysis are the mission statements of the universities involved in my study: UANL and ITESM. As part of my overall strategy, the analysis of these documents could let me see how the institutions “pictured” the type of students they wanted to *produce* (specific word actually used in their literature). In my opinion, these ‘pictures’ were sending a message about the type of identity they envisioned in their graduates. The analysis of these documents could offer a view into the institutions’ rationale for aiming at such identities. By analysing

documents in my research, I stated my assumption that “they act as some form of expression or representation of relevant elements of the social world, or that we can trace or ‘read’ aspects of the social world through them” (Mason 1996: 72). Alongside with the other two methods of data collection, “documents...may provide an alternative angle on, or add another dimension to, your research questions” (Ibid: 73). An important issue in choosing documents as a complementary source in my study was the possibility of tracing in these sources the themes and discourses underlying some of the ideas in HE that I could compare with the students’ discourse. Analysing the mission statements of the universities allowed me to see how much the students were repeating such discourses in their accounts and in what ways they were diverging from them

Taking the texts as a third source of researchable data in my study implied that they would be collected and analysed following the same criteria used for the interviews and the students’ accounts (Mason, 1996). Their analysis needed to be from an interpretive and critical position taking into account “factors relevant to or speaking of their context, production and consumption (Mason 1996: 77). Following this principle, I analysed the three sources of data applying the same methodology of coding as will be explained in the following section. Something important to clarify here is that although the same methodology of coding was used in the analysis of the three sources, the depth with which I treated them was different, devoting more detailed analysis to the biographical accounts than to the other two sources. As they were acting as complementary sources, the analysis I made, although less detailed, served the purpose of giving a background to find out and discuss how the different discourses on meanings of HE sometimes differed and other times showed strong similarities, as it was one of the aims of my research.

In the selection of methods I made to conduct this study, there implicitly lies the idea that each one contributes to a different angle of the answer to my research questions. I chose these three methods (educational biographical account, interview and document analysis) to assemble a general framework that would let me look into the way students’ identity was constructed. The biographical accounts gave me the “raw” data from students where they would write what HE meant for them and explain those meanings

in relation to their lives. The interviews with the academic secretaries (albeit only a small number and in senior positions) were useful in order to find out how they saw the students as part of the whole university system and what type of students they had in mind when they talked about the students' profile. The documents I gathered from the institutions outlined what these institutions see as the profile of their graduates as well as what they see as the role of education in society. My intention was to have a multi-voiced picture of the issue I was studying; a picture that would enable me to look at the construction of identity from different perspectives to find whether these perspectives connected and if so, where. This decision to have a multi-voiced picture meant important decisions had to be considered as to how many methods to use, how to combine them in the collection and data analysis and very importantly as well, *who* to have as respondents to the questions I wanted to investigate. Making these decisions, there were theoretical as well as practical issues to attend and this is what I describe in the following section.

3.5 Theoretical sampling of participants

Sampling and selecting participants for a research study brings issues that involve reflecting on who, in the universe of population to study, would give relevant information to the research questions in the study (Mason, 1996). In this qualitative study sampling followed a purposive approach, rather than a statistically or probability drawn one (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Mason 1996; Silverman, 2000; Cohen et al 2000).

The logic of theoretical or purposive sampling (Mason 1996: 97) means that “you select units which will enable you to make meaningful comparisons in relation to your research questions, your theory and the type of explanation you wish to develop.” Glaser and Strauss (1967), for example, defined theoretical sampling as selecting groups based on their relevance to the research questions and the theoretical position.

According to Flick (1998:65), in theoretical sampling the individuals or groups are selected according to their expected level of new insights for developing theory. The decisions on sampling “aim at that material which promises the greatest insights, viewed in the light of the material already used and the knowledge drawn from it.” Following these definitions, the unit of analysis in this study was undergraduate students and academic secretaries of two universities. A subsequent issue in sampling after defining this unit of analysis is to determine the size. As pointed by Cohen et al (2000), the planning of the research implies paying attention to the purposes of the study as well as, and to the same extent, to the constraints implied. The type of constraints I needed to take into account to select my sample had to do with timescale (allocated time for fieldwork in my Ph D project), human resources (one researcher), and funding issues related to the two previous factors. As indicated by Cohen et al (2000: 92), “factors such as expense, time and accessibility frequently prevent researchers from gaining information from the whole population.” It is in circumstances with such constraints that it is important to select deliberately or ‘purposively’ who should be included and excluded to build up a sample that satisfies the needs of the research.

3.5.1 Participant students

In the selection of respondents for this study, the sampling was defined in advance by certain criteria. Following Cohen et al’s (2000: 92) considerations that, due to the different constraints outlined before, I needed to “be able to obtain data from a smaller group in such a way that the knowledge gained [was] representative of the total population (however defined) under study.” The student informants were male and female undergraduates from a public university (UANL) and a private one (ITESM). They were from the areas of science and social sciences and in their second year of study. I chose students with these characteristics because they would have been already part of the university for one year and would supposedly have had more experience in their role as university students. They would also belong to different systems (public and private) and to different areas of study. The purpose of this selection aimed at

including a representative group which reflected the general characteristics of the type of higher education system followed in Mexico with public and private institutions. The students I sampled belonged to the two largest HEIs in the State of Nuevo Leon, Mexico, where the study took place. The following charts summarize the sample of the study. Table 1 gives the percentages of the entire sample. Table 2 presents the break down per institution.

Type of university	Total	Male	Female	Science	Soc. science	Foreign	Local
Public & private	349	58.74 %	41.26 %	68.19 %	31.81 %	33.24 %	66.76 %

Table 1. Students' sample

Sample attributes	Private- ITESM (%)	Public- UANL (%)
Percentage of total sample	52.15	47.85
Male	64.84	52.10
Female	35.16	47.90
Science	76.37	59.28
Social science	23.63	40.72
Foreign	57.69	6.59
Local	42.31	93.4

Table 2. Students' sample per institution

In terms of practicality and opportunity to collect of the sample, I should mention the fact that all the informants were in a classroom when they answered my enquiry exercise (educational biographical account). Finding students grouped in a class offered advantages. I could have a good opportunity to sample a group with the characteristics needed. Applying the exercise on the university premises meant that I could collect all the pieces of

writing the same day. This would avoid at least one problem related with some methods like questionnaires, where people send them out and only a low percentage is recovered. The advantages of this practicality, although helpful in collecting the data, did pose different questions in terms of consent and ethics. Would I have had the same response had

I given the option to students to return the exercise at their own time or even to do it or not at all? How intrusive was my presence and the application of an exercise they were not supposed to answer? The implications this could have for the researcher are discussed in more detail (section 3.9) when I address some of the ethical issues in this study.

3.5.2 Participant academic secretaries

I interviewed one academic secretary from each of the four departments I worked with. Academic secretaries, in the universities where I conducted this research, are the people in charge of the academic overview of the Faculty or Department: curriculum administration, planning, and initiatives for academic reform. They are also in charge of running programmes for curriculum and academic staff development as well as any other changes pertaining to curriculum concerns. Teaching is also an important part of their responsibilities, in this respect, their position is similar to heads of departments in that they deal with administration issues as well as conducting classes. I am aware that due to the small sample I used to analyse academic discourse, there could be a problem to draw many inferences from it. Using this type of sample, I must acknowledge the possibility of my interpretations to include only one particular view of the 'academic' discourse since I am not including junior academics who could perhaps have differing views on the universities' mission and which are not considered in this research. As to this, it is important to remember that when I talk about the views of the academics, that is the universe I am referring to since their discourse was the one I wanted to use to as a point of comparison with the students' views. Following the concept of purposive or theoretical sampling, the people I interviewed were key decision-makers in their academic departments and met the profile as the type of 'official' discourse I wanted to

include in my analysis. Their opinions could allow me to compare, for example, the official with the private discourse of students as to the type of identity the universities were looking for. Another reason to include 'head figures' in my study was to find how they perceived the universities' mission statements operationalised in the two institutions. Mason (1996: 96) supports a decision like this saying that in theoretical or purposive sampling "you select units which enable you to make comparisons in relation to your research questions, your theory and the type of explanation you wish to develop." The academics' position, experience, academic background and affiliation with the institutions could give me different perspectives relating to how their Faculty fitted in the whole picture of the university, as well as to what profile the university wants for students. This last part was one of the key points in my interest in interviewing them. To see how they pictured students as graduates and as part of the present system they were running was one of the questions I wanted to research. Perhaps the academics' answer could lead me into an area of knowledge either different or similar to that I was going to collect from the students' accounts or the university mission statements.

In the public university (UANL), I interviewed the academic secretary of the School of Mechanical Engineering (FIME, as it reads in Spanish) and the one from the School of Philosophy and Letters (FFYL), an equivalent to Philosophy and Arts in the UK system. In the private university (ITESM), the interviewees were one from the School of Engineering and Architecture and the other one from the School of Humanities. In total they were 3 males and one female academic secretary. My purpose in choosing these schools was to have a sample that represented science and social science students. Due to the particular organisation of the departments in each university, the schools here mentioned were the closest selection that had the targeted group of informants I needed. The following table illustrates the sample of academic secretaries interviewed.

Type of university	Departments	Gender
Public (UANL)	Science: FIME (Electrical & Mechanical Engineering)	Male
	Social science: Philosophy and Arts School	Male
Private (ITESM)	Science: DIA (Engineering and Architecture)	Female
	Social science: Humanities and Social science	Male
Total	4	4

Table 3.3 Departments and academic secretaries

3.6 Procedure of data collection

The following section describes the process of data collection followed in this study. Along with the description of the process, I am including a series of reflections on how I experienced the methods as a researcher. My decision to include these impressions follows my belief that my role as researcher formed an important part of the research process since impressions of the data could influence my analysis and interpretations. Coffey and Atkinson see this reflexivity in the research process as ‘dialogues’ between the data, the informants, and the researchers, themselves. They also advocate the documenting of these ‘dialogues’ as “transactions in the research process that should lead to reflections and decisions” (Coffey & Atkinson 1996: 191).

3.6.1 Educational biographical account technique

As previously introduced in section 3.4.1, in order to collect information from students I used a method that I called the educational biographical account. This technique combines an information eliciting activity (word association) followed by a type of autobiographical account. The eliciting information activity required students to write five words they related to the key words ‘university education’ (*educación universitaria* in Spanish). The autobiographical account was intended to be a piece of writing with at

least two paragraphs where students explained why they had chosen such words; and under what circumstances those words have become important in their lives. This was done in an attempt to examine the meanings students were attaching to those words once they had related them to the concept of “university education.”

This is how the technique was conducted. Students were asked to write the five words they related to the phrase “university education”⁴. After that, they were asked to explain what those words meant for them. Before students started writing, I explained to them the aims of my research as well as the confidentiality with which their answers would be treated. I did this for practical as well as ethical reasons. I needed them to focus on writing what was in their minds when they thought about their university education. I also wanted to reassure them that I would keep their writings confidential at all times. The main intention of the writing exercise was to find what ideas or themes emerged from their answers and see how they would connect to issues of identity construction.

As part of the information I needed to classify each text, I asked them to include on their page: age, gender, their area of study, degree they were studying for and the year they were in. I also asked if they were from Nuevo Leon (local), another State of Mexico, or another country (foreign). This information was used to classify the students’ texts according to the type of degree they were doing – science or social science - and if they were from a public or a private institution. I also wanted to see how many men and women had participated in the study as well as how long they had been in the university. By grouping students into these different categories (gender, degree, and years of experience in the university) my idea was to see whether there were any significant differences in the answers given by students depending on the field of study, gender and place where they were from or lived. Reflecting on the scope of the findings referring to this aim of my research, I must admit that the data generated through the account and the type of analysis followed did not allow for an in-depth analysis of these factors and that the interpretations derived and presented in the findings account for general tendencies found in the data without detailed explanations. To account for these

⁴ An example on how the technique was responded is found on appendix 1.

claims with stronger evidence a more advanced study is needed and can be a good suggestion for further research.

The settings for the application of this technique were university classrooms. I was allowed to come into the class and apply the activity, taking the time that would have been allocated to the lecture. This implied in many cases long waits to find groups available and lecturers who were kind enough to let me use their time and their groups. This issue was particularly difficult in the private university where permission was not given until the very end of my stay making it difficult to gather sufficient texts to have a more representative sample. The availability in the public university was less of a problem and most groups were covered in a relatively shorter period. The application of the account took approximately 40 minutes which is what every teaching period lasts. In total, it took me about two weeks in each university to collect all the students' data including without including getting official permission to locate the possible groups and ask the lecturers for their permission as well.

3.6.2 Reflections on applying the method

The application of this technique was, in general terms, one of the most enjoyable parts of my fieldwork experience. Going to the different groups and talking to students about my research project was something that I enjoyed doing. The fact that I was trying out a new technique was initially both a concern and a challenge. The question of “are they answering what I will need for my research questions?” came to me several times. The more I applied the technique in different groups, the more obvious its strengths and weaknesses were becoming apparent. Some of the first groups I worked with had a more difficult experience as I was trying to elaborate a “good” explanation of what I wanted in the paper. After I realized there was some information I would need from students, which I had not included in the original format, I made some additions to the form. For example, I added the question on what State, city or country they were from in the case where they were ‘foreign’ and not local students. I did this when I realised that some students were marking ‘foreign’ although they lived in the same State but

were from a city different from where the university was located. Another element I added was contact information for the students. I saw that in some accounts their handwriting could be a problem and that perhaps I would need to contact them later on to clarify some information. In some cases students provided their email, in other cases phone numbers, while some others did not write down anything. These changes did not affect the purpose of the exercise since it only applied to extra information that students had to supply and not to what they had to do in the account. This let me experience one of the benevolent sides of qualitative research where rewriting your process along the way is part of the research experience and opens a space for reflexivity for the researcher.

The responses from students registered on paper (in the account), as well as what I caught as first impressions while I was applying the technique, were an interesting part of my field research. Some students were surprised that I was asking for their opinions; others gave me the impression that they were taking it as another composition class assignment. Some other students demonstrated some type of disagreement with being asked, as will be seen when I produce examples of their responses in chapter 4. Boredom was also part of the environment as well. While students' responses in the papers show what they were being asked to do (write about your impression of university education), their nonverbal language also made me reflect on questions like: "How used are students to being asked their opinion?" "How open can they be about it when the exercise is done inside the university?" "Would it have changed had it been done in a social gathering or by somebody who was not a lecturer?" All these questions were part of my internal reflections and impressions as I carried out this part of the fieldwork, a part I deeply enjoyed. These impressions became helpful later on in the analysis of data and the interpretation of findings.

3.6.3 Interviews to the academic secretaries

In order to collect data from the academic secretaries, interviews were arranged to take place in their offices at the universities (UANL & ITESM). The following table shows the informants for the interviews and the departments included in the sample:

Type of university	Departments	Gender
Public (UANL)	Science: FIME (Electrical & Mechanical Engineering)	Male
	Social science: Philosophy and Arts School	Male
Private (ITESM)	Science: DIA (Engineering and Architecture)	Female
	Social science: Humanities and Social science	Male
Total	4	4

Table 4 Academic secretaries' interviews

I conducted 4 interviews in total (3 males and 1 female) and their duration varied from 40 to 60 minutes each. A sample of the interview guide is in Appendix 2.

3.6.4 Reflections on the application of the interviews

During the interviews, I recorded their answers as well as took notes on some of their responses as the interviews proceeded. The reactions of the academic secretaries to the interviews varied. Some of the interviewees would wait for a prompt to continue talking; others would literally ask me what my next question was. I assumed this had to do with their experiences with structured interviews where the sequence of questions is more fixed. As to their communication patterns during the interview, it was difficult in the beginning to get some of them to talk, yet as the interview proceeded, their answers

were longer and given in more detail. In one case in particular, I had to kindly remind the interviewee what the actual question had been so he could go back to the topic!

It was interesting not only what the interviewees were saying but how they were saying it. As Holstein and Gubrium (1997) say, it is both the content and the form what make up the active interviewing a rich context for meaning making and knowledge production. In answering the questions they were also constructing who they were in front of me. As the interview unfolded, different angles of their identity as educators, heads of departments, holders of a profession and other personal features came together. It was my impression that the institutional part of their responses was in continuous dialogue with that of them as individuals (man, woman, professor, lecturer, parent). Another interesting aspect of the interviews was the fact that I, as an interviewer, had been part of the universities' academic staff involved in the study. Laine (2000) writes of this as she problematises the role of the researcher as an insider in the field. My familiarity with the system was very helpful to have access to the field, for example; yet it brought other dilemmas for me in terms of confidentiality and my own view of the interviews. In terms of access to the field, although the public university interviews in general facilitated the access to the classrooms, it took longer to get the appointments. In the case of the private university interviews, they had more gatekeeping but appointments were eventually scheduled on time. This far from being a wasted event brought insights to me as to what type of message both institutions are sending students about their disposition to offer interviews and paying attention to a research project focused on their students. Perhaps their interest could have been greater had this research been one of their projects and not one from an outsider.

3.6.5 Documents

The documents I collected for analysis were the mission statements from both universities. As these are documents of the public domain, I took them from their

websites⁵. The content of these documents generally specifies what the universities see as their role in society: to educate citizens with the abilities and knowledge necessary to be successful and contribute to the development of their country. This is an example of the first part of their mission statements:

ITESM

The Technological Institute of Superior Studies of Monterrey is a university system whose mission is to form people who are committed to the development of their community in order to improve it in the social, economic and political sphere; people who are internationally competitive in their field of knowledge. This mission includes conducting research and extension programmes that are relevant to the sustainable development of the country.

El Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey es un sistema universitario que tiene como misión formar personas comprometidas con el desarrollo de su comunidad para mejorarla en lo social, en lo económico y en lo político, y que sean competitivas internacionalmente en su área de conocimiento. La misión incluye hacer investigación y extensión relevantes para el desarrollo sostenible del país.

UANL

UANL has as a mission:

- To form professionals, researchers, lecturers and technicians, as well as to do and promote applied scientific research.
- To analyse regional and national problems.
- To organize and promote artistic creativity in all its forms in order to take it to

⁵ UANL's website: <http://www.uanl.mx/uanl/index.html>

ITESM's website: <http://www.itesm.mx>

the community.

- To contribute to the conservation of the national and universal cultural heritage.

UANL tiene como misión:

- *Formar profesionales, investigadores, maestros universitarios y técnicos, así como realizar y - Fomentar la investigación científica en sus formas básica y aplicada*
- *Considerar los problemas regionales y nacionales.*
- *Organizar, realizar y fomentar la creación artística en sus diversas formas de expresión, hace participe a la comunidad de la cultura*
- *Contribuir a la preservación del acervo cultural, nacional y universal.*

Another section outlines the expected profile of their students and graduates as will be shown in the analysis of the documents in the next chapter. Appendixes 3 and 4 show a full version of these statements.

3.7 Procedure of data analysis

The analysis of the data gathered from the students' biographical accounts, interviews and documents followed the general principles outlined within qualitative research. These principles indicate that the researchers need to have a qualitative strategy to analyse the data and present the findings in a suitable way (Molina, 2003). Different authors have addressed the array of strategies to do qualitative analysis (Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2000; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994) proposing models for processing, organisation and presentation of data. In this study, the qualitative analytical strategy involved the analysis model of 'coding and categories' developed originally by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later versions by Strauss and Corbin (1990), and Miles and Huberman (1994). In order to facilitate the processing and management of the data, the NVIVO software was used.

3.7.1 Process of coding: theoretical framework

The process of coding to analyze qualitative data is supported by the general principles of grounded theory outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) where analytical pieces of information are developed from the texts themselves. Although there are different names given to the process and one model may include more categories than others, a central feature of grounded theory is the coding process (Henderson, 2003). According to Miles & Huberman (1994: 56), codes are labels for assigning units of meaning to the data collected and “coding is analysis”. The process of analysis in this study followed the model proposed by these authors and it includes *first-level coding* (summarising segments of data) and *pattern coding* (grouping summaries into themes or constructs).

First-level coding is the initial step of the process where the data are separated and divided into discreet and smaller parts. It is a “device for summarizing segments of data” (Miles and Huberman 1994: 69). Usually this step breaks the data into segments whose attached label (code) will be later refined, enriched or replaced. Codes change in the analysis process as they are examined carefully and compared in their similarities and differences. The coding process implies an ongoing procedure of making comparisons and asking questions. In this way, the researcher is trying to “assign the single most appropriate (“better,” more encompassing) code among those related to a given research question” (Miles and Huberman 1994: 65). Pattern coding “is a way of grouping first-level codes into smaller numbers of sets, themes, constructs” (ibid: 69). These patterns have an explanatory and inferential nature and help identify emergent themes and explanations along the analysis. These pattern codes would include a bigger amount of material into more meaningful units of analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) best describe the functions of pattern coding that best helped my analysis as follows:

- It reduces large amounts of data into a smaller number of analytic units.
- It helps the researcher to create a cognitive map, evolving a more integrated scheme for understanding the interrelations.
- For multiple method analysis, it lays the groundwork for triangulation of methods analysis by surfacing common themes and directional process.

In general, from first level to pattern coding, the segmentation and analysis of the data goes from discrete units to categories that are more inclusive. The revision of pattern codes may also imply changes; however, these changes are done in the interest of refinement and qualification by which the codes or meta-codes by now, will get “more explanatory power, [by] better defining the parameters within which the explanation will hold” (Miles and Huberman 1994: 71). The last categories or patterns generally turn into themes, explanations and eventually theoretical constructs which come to form the basis of the analysis and the generation of findings and theory development.

3.7.2 Process of coding: practical implications of the data processing

Qualitative research generally includes small scale studies (Mason, 1996); however, in the opinion of Henderson (2003), following a grounded theory approach, the coding processing of data can apply to social research that requires investigation of large quantities of texts. This was the case of my study. Although the main body of data was a large amount of accounts (349), my goal was to investigate the meanings students attached to HE and how that reflected in their writings. This purpose required analyzing the documents in a qualitative way rather than just by quantitative measures. The quantitative parameters I could get from the analysis were helpful, however, to motivate more analysis of the categories with higher or lower percentages in the sample. Working with a large sample did not impede the qualitative treatment of the data. The fact that it was a large sample required a good management system to process, organise and retrieve the data for analysis. Because the nature of coding as a tool of analysis implies making categories of data at different levels, comparing and reducing wider categories, the use of computer software was helpful. Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson (1996: 7.2) describe the benefits of using the software as twofold: “First, it facilitates the attachment of these codes to the strips of data. Second, it allows the researcher to retrieve all instances in the data that share a code.” Although using the package was at some stages very time consuming, it brought significant advantages to the analysis. The practicalities to organise and analyse the data are described below.

3.7.3 Use of technology in the analysis

To process the data in this study I used the qualitative research software NVIVO. In order to produce the texts to be analysed, it was necessary to convert all the data into computer files. The students' accounts were originally handwritten so they needed to be converted into .rtf files (rich text format) before they were entered into the software in Spanish. The same applied with the transcriptions of the interviews and the mission statements of the universities. The main reason for using this software, as stated before, was that it facilitated the manipulation of big amounts of data besides the possibility of providing some quantitative results, if needed.

For the analysis of the students' accounts with NVIVO, the first step was to enter each account into the program and catalogue it by using the following characteristics or attributes:

students' gender: male or female

area of study: sciences or social sciences

type of university attended: public or private

locality: whether they were local or foreign⁶

The assignment of these attributes was important since they were intended to offer the possibility to make comparisons between themes (categories of analysis) and attributes i.e. female / male respondents; public / private university students; local / foreign respondents. A decision I made about the attribute of each is important to clarify here. Because most of the students were between the ages of 19 and 21, I decided not to include this as another variable to compare. The number of mature students (10 in total) was not significant enough to make strong comparisons between ages.

The second step in the analysis was to apply the (thematic) codes to sections of the documents by using some of the words found in the texts (first level coding) or

⁶ Local in this context meant that they were from the State of Nuevo Leon, where the study was conducted. Foreign meant that they were from any other State or country.

attaching new ones if a more comprehensive term was needed. The third step involved the second level of analysis (pattern coding) which implied organising the first set of codes from the first level coding into wider categories that denoted a pattern in the codes. At this stage, the manuscripts had been coded at least twice and the number of analytical categories has been refined and reduced. According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996) coding links data fragments to a particular idea or concept; then they in turn relate to one another. It is in this thinking 'back and forth' that the analysis happens and develops along the process. Agreeing with Miles and Huberman on this subject, Molina (2003) suggests that the important analytical work lies in establishing and thinking about such linkages, as well as in the identification of relevant concepts. Dealing with a large body of data meant that the number of codes and categories in the beginning would be numerous. In order to come to more general and finite categories of analysis, it was important to reach the saturation point in the analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This saturation point meant that after a constant comparison of categories, I could no longer assign new categories to the data examined since the categories I had developed more inclusive. At that point, the analysis ended and the general categories for discussion were established.⁷

The analysis of the interview transcripts and the mission statements followed the same process of coding. In a final stage of the analysis, the transcriptions as well as the files from the mission statements from the universities were analyzed looking for patterns or categories that could be traced and correlated to some of the ones found in the students accounts. In this sense, although the 'texts' underwent the similar 'coding' analysis, the depth and focus of such analysis was directed by the analysis of the students accounts which was the central source of data. This clarification is important here because although both texts could have been analysed with a more biographical approach in the case of the interviews, or with a more text- oriented documentary analysis, in the case of the mission statements, my decision was to standardise the analysis by using the same

⁷ A detailed outline on the process of coding applied to other research projects is given by Miles and Huberman's (1994) handbook for qualitative analysis referenced in the bibliography.

coding methodology, compromising, in a way, a more in-depth analysis. The reason for this, as I stated previously in the criteria for sampling, was the decision to use these two types of texts as complementary sources and background against which I could compare the students' views; the final aim was to have both the private and the public discourse in my analysis.

3.8 Establishing validity and reliability

What is validity and reliability? Some authors (Cohen et al 2000) catalogue validity and reliability as parameters set for quantitative studies, suggesting that it is not possible to apply the canons of quantitative research on qualitative analyses. In the same field of qualitative methodology, Silverman (2000:40) acknowledges this position, yet he argues that both “reliability and validity are key ways of evaluating research” and that they need to be taken into account if qualitative methodologies do not want to be played down as lacking rigour. The previous points of view reflect the debate over what makes research reliable and valid and from this debate, different definitions of validity and reliability emerge.

For authors like Silverman (2001) who argue that inclusion of numerical measures in qualitative research can increase its scientific character, reliability is concerned with whether the same piece of research could be replicated by using the same procedures and arrive at the same research findings and conclusions. Another definition asks whether the same researchers would expect to obtain the same findings if they followed the same procedures again (Ross, 2001). In this respect, Robson (1993:73) argues that total reliability could be expected “if a study were to be repeated with everything identical to the first time, as an exact replication, and the exact same results were obtained.” However, he goes on to assert that “it is only in theory and is not simple, because even if the same sample of participants were studied the second time, they are not the same. They have been influenced by the first study”. In practice, this precision in the replication is never quite exact since “qualitative studies are seldom engaged in such

unchanging objects” (Flick 1998:223). However, an attempt to repeat the study as closely as possible, which could reproduce the same findings as in the first study, is the practical test of reliability of the findings: “For reliability to be calculated, it is incumbent on the scientific investigator to document his or her procedure” (Kirk and Miller 1986: 72 in Silverman 2001). In terms of showing convincing research, Mason (1996:146) suggests that “in order to convince others, you must provide some sort of account of exactly how you achieved the degree of reliability and accuracy you claim to be providing.” In qualitative research “reliability can be regarded as a fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being studied” (Cohen et al 2000: 119).

For Ross (2001), validity is concerned with the interpretation of the data and it usually refers to whether the researchers are measuring and finding what they think they are finding, a statement supported by Flick (1998). According to Ross, the issue at stake is credibility of the interpretations made by the researcher and it is important to address it by going back to the purpose of qualitative studies on interpretation as opposed to reproduction or replication of realities. As for generalization, she proposes that, given that qualitative studies are purposively sampled rather than statistically, the opportunities for generalization could be limited. Instead, she proposes transferability of the findings to other contexts, which will most likely be done at a theoretical level.

To account for reliability and validity in this study I resorted to the (alternative) concepts given by Mason (1996) (and replicated by Ross, 2001) in order to evaluate a piece of qualitative research. These three elements are *reliability and accuracy of method*, *validity of data generation method* and *generalizability of analyses*. In order to account for the reliability and accuracy of the method, I have documented how the process of collection and analysis of the data were done (section 3.7). For this purpose, the use of the computer software NVIVO was adequate and helpful (Coffey, Holbrook & Atkinson, 1996; Cohen et al 2000; Gibbs, 2002) as it could offer effective ways of retrieving and storing the coding at different stages of the analysis. In accordance with Mason’s suggestion, Flick’s recommendations for achieving reliability (1998: 228) documenting the process were followed by:

- doing a quality recording and documenting of the data (doing a systematic identification and organisation of the data)
- keeping consistency in the coding process
- following the same guide for collecting the students' accounts and the interviews.

I agree with Mason (1996: 146) in that the concern for reliability in qualitative analyses "should be expressed in terms of ensuring - and demonstrating too - that your data generation and analysis have been not only appropriate to the research questions, but also thorough, careful, honest and accurate." I believe that by basing my analysis on the original texts produced by my respondents and by documenting the process I followed to get to the categories of analysis, my study has achieved this degree of reliability.

In terms of validity, Mason suggests doing a *validation of method* and one of the most common practices for this is the triangulation of methodologies advocated by authors like Denzin (1989 cited in Mason 1996: 148). Through this triangulation of method, the researcher is basically trying to look at the same phenomenon through different eyes. In this study, collecting data from three different sources (students, academics and institutional websites) I not only attempted to get validity on the grounds of 'measuring the evidence' from three different angles; this approach was also indicative that the study in general from data collection to data analysis was supported by the epistemological position that "social phenomena are a little more than one-dimensional" and that the study in question "has accordingly managed to grasp more than one of those dimensions" (Mason 1996: 149). In terms of validity of interpretation, check-coding the transcripts "is very useful for the lone researcher" (Miles and Huberman 1994: 65). Along the same lines, Flick (1998: 233) suggests doing "peer debriefing," which means that somebody else should look at your categories of analysis and judge how appropriate they are for what they describe. In my study, my supervisor as well as a colleague, who acted as a 'critical friend,' discussed the generation and meaning of the codes assigned as well as their appropriateness in the coding process. In projects where more researchers are available, check-coding is also very important, and two researchers code the same piece of data to see agreement/disagreement. Because of the limitations of human resource and time scales in my study, I resorted to having a critical friend and

my supervisor as check-coders. Another aspect related to the accuracy in my study had to do with the translations of the documents since they were in Spanish. Before entering the documents in the software and doing the coding, a professional translator checked all the manuscripts.

The last issue addressed by Mason (1996: 158) with respect to evaluating a piece of research has to do with generalisability of findings and the fact that “generalization is not easy to achieve in qualitative research” since qualitative research tends to be small scale and context-specific. Why then should a qualitative study worry about generalisability? Because the capacity of the findings to have generalisability has to do with the “wider resonance” of the research. Mason suggests that a type of generalization that can be achieved through qualitative studies is theoretical, that is, that the researcher can use a detailed explanation of the setting and the processes followed, in order to frame relevant questions about other settings and procedures. The plausibility of this will depend on “the extent of their similarity or difference...to the first setting” (Mason 1996: 155). This type of generalisability is the one I attempted to make with my findings since the sample I chose was also determined under theoretical assumptions (see theoretical sampling section 3.5.1). The characteristics of my sample may be found in similar contexts in Mexico, and in general, I might venture to say, where systems of public and private HE are operating. By looking at the literature (chapter 2), it is not difficult to locate similar educational contexts around in the world where students and academics are undergoing similar experiences. Perhaps the effects of the ‘globalised’ practices in HE we are experiencing nowadays such as similar curriculum paradigms, policies of participation and, in general, more similar ‘university environments’ (*habitus*) could give studies of this type ‘wider resonance’ as Mason put it. Their degree of generalizability would imply that the findings could be used as reference points for other researchers to prompt questions about similar educational contexts but not as points for generalization in a positivist sense. As a general strategy for evaluation of research, not only do its potentials need to be addressed but also its limits and this is what occupies the content of the following section.

3.9 Limitations and issues of this research design

As Silverman (2000) states, there are only ‘useful’ or ‘more useful than’ techniques to fit a theory and a methodology. It is important to address the issues and limitations that have emerged from implementing this qualitative study. First, I will outline the issues related to the collection of the data; limits of the biographical approach and the application of the educational biographical technique; concerns about interviewing and the transformation of oral into written texts; access to the data and informed consent as well as the researcher’s membership to the sites where the research was conducted. Second, I will discuss concerns related to the analysis of the data, which in most cases maintained a close relationship to the ones related to the collection.

3.9.1 Limits and challenges of the biographical approach and the application of the educational biographical account

One of the challenges of the biographical method is the variety of material it may cover. Although some clarifications have been made in respect to some terms such as life history vs. life story (Atkinson 1998), the main term remains at times elusive of definition. According to Miller (2000: 19) “life history refers to a series of substantive events arranged in chronological order.” Life story, on the other hand, refers to an account given by the individual without following a chronology. The individual chooses what to talk about and what to omit as well as the order of events. The type of material produced in my research falls into this last category of life story, although it was not produced through an interview but through a text. Another difference is that I give the individuals a central topic to write about limiting their choices to only one aspect of their life, higher education. For the sake of clarity in this research, and in accordance with Roberts (2002: 3), “the term ‘biographical research’ will be used to denote work which uses the stories of individuals and other ‘personal materials’ to understand the individual life within its social context.”

Although the field of biographical research poses interesting challenges in terms of interpretation, its relevance in the development of qualitative methodology is notable. “Biographical research has the important merit of aiding the task of understanding major social shifts, by including how new experiences are interpreted by individuals within families, small groups and institutions” (Roberts 2002: 5). This aspect relates closely to my area of study since exploring how universities as social institutions influence the way students construct their identity brings up questions on how students interpret their experience within this social and dynamic setting. The contexts and disciplines where biographical research has been used give it an interdisciplinary character as was shown in the literature review (chapter 2). In my interest to explore students’ identity and the interrelation of this with their educational experience, a biographical account could reveal some of the ways in which this was related to their social context, how they saw their role in society as participants, observers, active agents, etc. It acted as a window into the world that makes up the students’ identity as they go through university life, as will be apparent in the findings. It could also provide me with a wider vision on the different agendas students have in their daily life as they cope with university education, i.e. their preoccupation about their future, their possible change in social class and their participation in society. “Biographical research is part of a movement to reveal and understand the ‘personal’ and its interlinking with the immediate and wider social context and political practices” (Roberts 2002: 31).

The relatively new appearance of the biographical method as a trend in social science research make it susceptible, as any other method, to hard criticism in terms of lacking unity in its epistemological and methodological assumptions. This is in part due to its eclecticism in the decisions as to what constitutes relevant material to study and how it is gathered and analysed. “This expansion of interest in the study of lives and the use of biographical material raises the immediate issue of whether there is really common ground –in epistemology, methodology, interpretation and theoretical framework: a shared approach” (Roberts 2002: 169). I agree with Roberts in that this *biographical turn* challenges the researchers and the audiences to do research in different ways; exploring old concepts in new lights and continue refining their methods of enquiry. That seems to be how emergent methodologies may develop and eventually be

recognised. As I have previously mentioned (p. 61) this openness and challenge in the method turned into a good opportunity for my technique to be tried, assessed, and to some extent developed.

One of the challenges faced with the application of the educational biographical account had to do firstly with using a technique that was innovative, in the sense that I had not used it before as an enquiry method but as a teaching tool. The uncertainty of not knowing if students were going to understand what I wanted them to write about was always there in the beginning. The way I gave the instructions and talked about my research in the introduction to the activity improved as more groups were surveyed I could see how the explanations I gave became more precise and the students' texts improved. This improvement was reflected in the students asking fewer questions about how to go about writing the account. Although this enabled me to become more reflective about how I was conducting the study; a pilot study using this technique could have been beneficial.

Another challenge to consider when applying this account is that not every student supplied the information I needed to classify the texts: gender, field of study, locality (previously mentioned in the procedure for data analysis) which would later be used to organise the data. Although this seemed problematic in the beginning, judging by the percentage of manuscripts not processed due to this reason (4%), the omission was not significant. In terms of the mechanics of the manuscript, the fact that students handwrote them made some texts more difficult to understand than others. My knowledge of Spanish helped me decipher most of the 'riddles' found, yet it was time consuming at times. A possible solution for this could have been to ask students to do it on a computer and that would have reduced the time spent converting the manuscripts into digital files later on. However, availability of resources and other issues related to access to students in their classrooms made this impossible.

3.9.2 Limits and challenges of active interviewing

One of the issues related to the use of a semi-structured interview is the fact that compared to structured interviews, where a prescriptive approach seems to be followed and all questions are outlined, the flexibility and openness of (active) semi-structured interviews brings about questions of focus and standardisation. This “inevitably raises questions of validity” since “biases are difficult to rule out” (Robson 1993: 229). While authors like Robson (1993) talk about biases and the difficulty in dealing with them, Holstein and Gubrium (1997) argue that “compared to more traditional perspectives on interviewing, the active approach seems to invite unacceptable forms of bias” bringing out the normality of a conversation (Holstein and Gubrium 1997: 125). Under the approach of active interviewing, both interviewer and interviewee are engaged in a conversation that allows for flexible answers, pauses and ordinary conversational deviations; thus making changes in the original plan and even changes of topic normal and expected features of the interview. “We must, therefore, learn to conceive of the error as evidence of not only of poor reliability but also of ‘normal’ interpersonal relations (Cicourel 1964: 74 in Silverman 2001: 96).

The issue of validity and lack of standardisation can be addressed by acknowledging the specificity of each interaction that happens while interviewing; “when an interview is seen as dynamic... one cannot simply expect answers on one occasion to replicate those on another because they emerge from different circumstances of production” (Holstein and Gubrium 1997: 117). The issue of validity and the presence of biased or contaminated material can be only criticised if a ‘minimalistic’ or narrow view on the type of material collected and analysed is taken. However, it is wise to remain open in dealing with issues like these and in finding ways to justify with our theory whatever approach we decide to follow. In this study, it was important for me to see what senior academics said about how they saw the role of the universities and what image they had of students. By asking general questions rather than specific ones, I wanted to analyse the ways in which some of the aspects that could be related to the students’ identity were present in their discourse. Furthermore, I was interested to see whether these aspects were present or not. So although conducting these interviews in the semi-

structured format I was running the risk of not getting all the information I wanted, I was convinced that the guide questions I had included would eventually lead me to the information I needed for my analysis. I believe the validity in this form of data collection could be drawn from the format that the interviews had, as well as by the triangulation of method I conducted by comparing themes of analysis between the three sources (interviews, students' accounts and mission statements).

The second problem related to interviews was the transcription from oral to written material. It is questionable in any methodology – quantitative and qualitative - how much of it could be lost or gained in this transition from oral to written material (Mason, 1996). There were features in my interviews that could not be part of the transcript, for example, non-verbal language of the interviewees, or the physical conditions of the place. One of the suggestions is to use the notes taken during the interview as sources of information that should come along with the interview data. I kept notes next to my interviews and have used them as part of my data analysis when I describe my impressions as to how the academics seemed to be reacting to my interviewing. Their reactions, as I interpreted them, were on the grounds of who they were as 'official' voices from the universities and me as a researcher, an insider (since I used to work for these institutions before coming to do my Ph. D) yet an outsider coming to collect data from them (see theme of academic identity in chapter 5). In this way, I was able to acknowledge the challenge of conducting interviews following a rather flexible yet structured format and to say that, in fact, the type of 'errors' that occurred during the interviewing process produced more data to resort to when interpreting my analysis. Another issue to consider while analysing the interview data had to do with the power/status relationship between me and the interviewees. Being a younger lecturer interviewing somebody who has a higher rank and status in the academic circle could have some effect in the way they answered, their disclosure and the type of 'image' they may have been interested in projecting before me and I will acknowledge this as I write about it as 'academic identity' a new emerging topic in my study in chapters 4 & 5.

3.9.3 Access to the data and issues of informed consent

The present issue of access to the data and issues of informed consent had to do with the settings where I conducted the study. Having a captive audience (students in already established groups) guaranteed that a good number of people would answer my exercise, although it did not guarantee their willingness to do it. As I previously mentioned, some of the texts I collected did not have all the information I need for classification. The answers in other texts gave me the impression that students were only killing time by answering them and showed rather shallow answers almost unrelated to a lived experience. For example, in the space I gave them to explain how the word they had chosen in the first part of the exercise related to their lives, some of them gave a definition as if they were taking them out of a dictionary. At first sight, this may seem disappointing; however, it could also be interpreted as the little interest students had in giving their opinions. Yet, this uninterested attitude, in my perception, could also be due to way they were being asked. This opened my mind to thinking of ways to improve the technique by perhaps combining it with a more direct method like a person-to person interview, as well as doing a pilot study to test it, as I mentioned before (see section 3.9.2). All in all, the response I obtained was positive in that it helped me see the degree of effectiveness and challenges my technique had.

3.9.4 Translation of data

Because most of the material to in my study was produced in Spanish, I was faced with the question of whether I needed to translate all of it or be selective as to what was ultimately necessary to be used for illustration in the research. In the interest of validity, I decided to offer a translation of the segments of data I used for illustration in the thesis so the reader can have access to the texts in the original language as well as in English. A professional translator checked the translations of all the data used. I must admit here that some sense of authorship of the accounts may be altered due to my translation but it is within the limitations of my study since all my informants used Spanish in their answers, and it was not expected to be done in any other language. While problems of

misrepresentation may arise in the writing of this research, one of the devices researchers resort to is considering the audience as co-authors since they 'create their own readings' (Ferguson & Golding, 1997). I have acknowledged the fact that by translating their texts, we both become authors of the analysed piece with all its limitations and intricacies. Not accepting this co-authorship, would make any issue of misrepresentation grow stronger.

3.9.5 Use of computers in the analysis of the data

One last point to address is the use of qualitative research software in the processing and analysis of my data. Although this is becoming a growing practice among social scientists, previously there had not been particular interest in the use of computers to analyse data, mainly to the relationship quantitative analysis kept with computer-aided research. However, as early as 1966, there already existed programs that could be used in qualitative analysis (Kelle, 1995). The main concern was, and I believe still is, how to deal with the semantic side of the material when computers only helped the statistical side. The amount of material generated through qualitative techniques and the way a computer could manipulate vast amount of data was an important factor in the turn of social scientists to computerised analysis. In my study, I still hold true to those concerns while I understand the advantages software can offer. The main advantage I found in using a computer program is the easy manipulation of texts that can be made. Frequency of texts and lexis can be analysed through these programs as well as statistical measurement of number of participants grouped by gender, age group, etc. Here the challenge is the interpretation one can make of the patterns that emerged; however, this is an issue in research in general, not necessarily related only to computers.

The program I used was NVIVO, a qualitative computer programme which works under the principles of coding information and creating connections between sets of data. While the way the information is organised or presented by NVIVO is appealing, using the programme, however, was time consuming. The amount of work involved in

converting the manuscripts into rtf files, entering all the manuscripts for coding, plus the time invested in training to use the software needs to be evaluated before using it. The main advantage I saw in using it was that how it helped in dealing with the large amount of documents I had. It was very helpful to organise the documents into groups by gender, type of institution, field of study and locality. By comparing the results of the analysis among these groups, I could make strategic comparisons of categories of analysis and information and clarify or refine some concepts. The challenge and work of the researchers when using the software remains as they make the relevant coding and connections needed to produce interesting interpretations (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Coffey, Holbrook & Atkinson, 1996; Gibbs, 2000).

3.9.6 Ethical issues of membership, confidentiality and feedback in the study

In the following section I address the issues of ethical concern that I encountered while conducting this research which primarily had to do with membership of the community where I did the study, confidentiality and feedback to the participants in the study.

3.9.6.1 Membership

One ethical aspect of my research that needed addressing was membership, that is, the fact that I belonged to the community where I was doing the research. Another was keeping confidentiality of the information received from both students and academics; and the third was giving feedback on the results of my research to the institutions involved. Having been a lecturer at the universities where I conducted the research, I must admit this may have influenced the way I perceived the informants as well as the information I gathered and analysed. According to Laine (2000), members of the researched community have role models with which the researchers may be aligned to and by which their performances may be judged. By interviewing academics who occupied top positions in the university, I had to comply with their disposition and

willingness to give me the interview under their own terms. As a lecturer and previous employee of those institutions I had knowledge of the protocols to follow and needed to negotiate between following the method and acting 'properly' according to the standards of the institution and the hierarchy my interviewees had in that setting.

Burgess (1991) talks about access to educational settings as an activity that requires negotiating and renegotiating throughout the research process. It implies that a set of relationships needs to be established between the researcher and the researched throughout the project in the give and take of data. This exchange of prerogatives between the researcher and those in the field that Burgess talks about seemed to be present in my study rather frequently. I believe the bias that could emerge from this type of interaction where membership to the field is an issue is not easy to tackle in strategic ways. It needs to be openly acknowledged so the reader has that in mind when approaching the researcher's interpretations. One of the brighter sides of being a member, however, was that once acknowledged as a member, there was easy access to classrooms and interviews with the academics.

3.9.6.2 Confidentiality

Confidentiality was another important issue and one of the prerogatives between my subjects and me. I informed both students and academics about the purpose of my study and the confidentiality of their answers. I also explained that the stages my research as well as the results could be accessed through a website I created as part of my research project ⁸. In terms of feedback to the institutions, I will bring a report back when I finish the research.

3. 10 Conclusion

⁸ http://arts.bham.ac.uk/rodriguez_cs

In reflecting on the research design of my study and the methodology used, I would like to underline that despite the challenges it has, working with a biographical method has been a rewarding experience. The opportunities that I had as a novice researcher to try out a new technique for data collection, as well as the challenges I had to solve for its analysis, were significant in my academic career. The presentations I made in some conferences and seminars about my experience using such a technique helped me develop a stronger conviction that the technique needs more refinement and that the challenges it poses are still there, but at the same time, that it is something I can develop in future research projects. Another aspect I found interesting when applying this design was the need to be reflexive about my own role in this research. By being a member of the same communities I researched, I needed to remind myself of the risk of misinterpretation of my participants' views. I needed to ask myself whether what I was interpreting came from their original answers or if my experience and memories from the 'field' were directing my interpretations. To this experience in qualitative research, Burgess (1991) asserts that being a member of the same culture that one is researching, it is hard to achieve a reasonable and 'risk' free level of detachment. Another point to evaluate in terms of interpretation and the use of this design is the fact that the senior academic sample may bring issues of 'unilateral' view of what academics think or how they position themselves in relation to the university missions. By acknowledging this, as I have done it previously, I find important to underline that when I talk about the academics' discourse in my findings and discussion, I am referring to the one I had access through my research (according to my purpose) and may be indicative of only academics in senior positions and not academics in general. Then again, as the purpose of a qualitative analysis is to interpret from a specific context, the type of interpretations I make should be taken following this view.

After following the design just described in this chapter, I will turn now to present the findings obtained from the overall analysis. The way I have organised these findings follows my interest in presenting first the views of the students as the encompassing set of meanings students attached to higher education. Followed by these will be the findings from the interviews with the senior academics and mission statements to signal the order of importance they have in this study.

4. PRESENTATION OF DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings obtained from the analysis of the three different sources of data used in this study: the students' biographical accounts, the academic secretaries' interviews and the mission statements from the two universities. At the centre of this research was the interest in exploring how university students talked about higher education and which of their ideas coincided with those of the academics and of the institutions. The final aim of the study was to see how these different views on education could exercise some influence on the way university students constructed their identity. A description of the main themes found forms the contents of this chapter.

In the organization of this chapter, it is important to clarify here that the section on the students' accounts takes up the biggest part of the chapter. Although this could be regarded as some type of imbalance in the writing, this was in a way inevitable for two reasons. One, the students' accounts constituted the main source that I intended to analyse in order to focus on their views on higher education. Two, as a consequence of the latter, it was the source where I collected more data from. The other two sources, academics' interviews and mission statements, although smaller in size, have been qualitatively analysed and have helped to better inform the issues found in the students' accounts. At the same time, they have provided a point of view of the education system from different angles.

The first part of this chapter contains a description of the processes of first level coding and pattern coding followed in the analysis of the data. The lists of codes from each coding as well as a definition of the codes are included in order to clarify the discussion of these codes or categories in the second part of the chapter.

The second part of the chapter presents what was found in the students' accounts: their views on higher education, how they relate to it, how they evaluate it as a part of their life project, what experiences they go through during their years in university and their expectations as well as their complaints about the system. It has been interesting to find that the things students relate to the meanings they give to higher education sometimes move from rather abstract ideas to more concrete ones, from personal to social concerns. The varied ways they define concepts like 'being educated' or 'successful' are insights into the ways they conceptualise their being university students. The possible implications of how this may relate to the way they create and recreate their identity as they go through university is a main interest in this research and it will be an issue for discussion in chapter 5.

The third section of this chapter presents the themes found in the interviews conducted with four academic secretaries in the universities involved. The themes reported here come from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted. It is interesting to note that the presence of the 'extra material' that came as the interview proceeded enriched the thematic analysis by showing what the academics' concerns were as well. Among these concerns, the academics talked about the challenges they experience with the realities of HEIs in Mexico and how this is experienced in their particular universities. The themes involved the academics' understanding of the role of the universities in society and the changes universities are going through. They talked about the expected profile of their graduates and the responsibility of the university to promote this profile. Another theme was the way they perceived students and their involvement or participation in society. A more detailed description of these findings is found in section 4.3 of this chapter.

The fourth part of the chapter focuses on the analysis of the mission statements of both universities. These documents are in the public domain and they mainly contain what the universities see as their role in the society, including what constitutes their 'academic offer' and their graduates' expected profile. The graduates' profile is the

longest section in these documents and it describes the values, attitudes and abilities university graduates are expected to have. The themes in general seem to point to the position of the university as a supplier of what the 'society' needs in terms of education. This idea of 'supplier' brings to light the notion of separation or disengagement between what is seen as 'the society' and the different sectors that make it. This notion of society pictures it as a group of isolated sectors rather than an integrated body. This is a theme that keeps appearing in the different data analysed and will be discussed later on in the conclusion of this chapter as well as in the following one.

The concluding part of this chapter presents the overlapping and distinctive themes detected in the different discourses analysed. By comparing the different analytical categories in each group, it was possible to find what themes ran through the three different sources and what themes kept appearing in only one category. What was common among students', academics' and the official documents' discourse? What seems to be strong in the students' accounts and perhaps invisible in the other two sources? This triangulation of findings brought new insights into the research and prompted more questions for discussion as well as giving it a stronger basis in terms of validity.

By writing about the findings in this order and fashion, I am trying to present what the private discourse (students' accounts) say about the value of higher education today, as well as what the public discourse (academics and mission statements of the universities) say. In general, it is about how students see themselves as educated people and agents of change and how academics perceive them as such. While my main interest is not to show a strict comparison in the voices of public and private discourses, it is to analyse how these two sides may interact with one another in the process of the students' identity construction. This chapter talks about 'students' as a general category (educational identity); patterns within the students such as institution attended and gender are tackled in chapter 5 when moving into particular issues of differences in identities.

4.1 Process of coding and generation of themes

The analysis of the students' accounts followed the first level and pattern coding procedures by Miles and Huberman (1994) outlined in chapter 3. According to their model, the names or labels to define a code should resemble - as close as possible - the respondents' words. That is how to begin the bottom-up approach they propose for qualitative data analysis and also a feature of the software NVIVO (thus the name of the software). The final number of students' accounts analyzed was 349.

4.1.1 First level coding

The first level coding was done taking the students' words or terms as codes, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). However, due to the high number of manuscripts, the number of codes increased and it soon became necessary to start grouping similar labels into more comprehensive codes. This first part of the coding, as Miles and Huberman (1994) point out, is already the beginning of the analysis and the decisions to make the groups should follow theoretical as well as practical reasons. In this process, the use of NVIVO was crucial because it was easier to go back to the list of codes (called 'coder' in the software) and redefine them and reorganize them according to the new definitions. I believe that with the amount of data in my study, it would have been very difficult to have done it without the benefits of data management that the software offers. Gibbs (2002) notes that the essential function of the qualitative analysis software is to manage the information through a database, but that the way the researcher can handle materials makes it more useful than a database itself.

This is the list of first-level coding themes used to analyze the three sources plus their definition. At this point they are listed alphabetically as they were sorted out by the software. In the following section of pattern-coding, they will be arranged according to the percentage of data comprised in each source (students' accounts, academic

interviews and official documents). There were 21 categories or themes obtained in this stage.

1 A new type of university

This category contains the passages where academics talked about the characteristics of the new university, either the type of university that they thought was needed or the one that is operating now, compared to a traditional model. This category includes changes in the curriculum, teacher's role and students' role. Words like tutor, currículo basado en competencias, modelo nuevo de universidad, etc. are included. This code is exclusive to the academics' interviews.

2 Academics criticize the educational system

This category is about the criticisms expressed by the academics about the educational system. These criticisms include ideas about the incongruence between the plans of education and the realities of universities in terms of access. It also contains ideas about the lack of links between the university and other social sectors.

3 Family project

This category includes concepts like reparation to parents or close relatives, investment, sacrifice and effort to support their studies, class flight and social mobility for the family, family expectations, making the family proud.

4 Graduates' profile: abilities and values

This category is about the abilities and values university graduates are expected to develop by the time they leave university. This is according to the academics' points of view.

5 How academics perceive students

This category contains those passages where academics talked about what attitude they perceive in students about promoting social change or getting involved in the promotion of society through their education. Their opinion whether they see them as involved or not in promoting social change, cooperative or individualistic.

6 Human capital

This category contains those passages where academics refer to the role of the university in creating or promoting the creation of human capital.

7 Job opportunities

This category is about the students' views on HE and how they relate it to job opportunities. The relationship is made either explicitly through certain words or indirectly as they talk about income and better standards of life.

8 Knowledge as an asset

This describes the concepts of preparation, education as a tool, bases for future studies, a benefit, and knowledge as an added value.

9 Mission of the HEIs

This category captures the ideas contained in an official document issued by the universities about their mission in society. It contains specific as well as general ideas about this topic.

10 Participation in society

This category includes concepts like education as a way to help the country make progress, to help the community, to be useful to the country as educated people (cultural capital).

11 Role of culture

This category contains passages where academics make reference to culture as an important part of the students' formation. The idea of culture expressed in most of the passages coded refers to a set of values.

12 Role of HEIs

This category contains passages where academics talk about the role of HEIs. Sometimes they talk about a 'new' role other times they say what they think the role is or should be.

13 Social distinction

This category represents those opinions that catalogue education as social distinction and it includes concepts like: status, class flight, social mobility, being better informed and more knowledgeable .

14 Socialization (later the meaning was clarified to 'Socialising')

This category includes concepts like friendships, connections, meeting people from other cultures, spending time with friends, and extra-curricular activities.

15 Students' complaints according to academics' point of view

This category contains the passages where academics talk about the complaints students seem to have about the university or university education

16 Students' expectations and positive views

This category was created to differentiate when students are expressing feeling and emotions that are positive, rather than negative. It is also about their expectations on HE and their goals in life related to it. The original name was only 'feelings and emotions' experienced but was later changed to positive feelings and negative experiences for the sake of clarity when coding.

17 Students' expected profile

This category includes those passages where academics talk about the profile they expect the students to develop either through university life or as graduates.

18 Students' negative views and criticisms

This category includes the following concepts: stress, tension, tiredness, disappointment, disillusion, effort, sacrifice, boredom, complaints. This category was created from the original "feelings and emotions" in order to differentiate those negative answers from the positive ones.

19 Teaching of abilities

This category contains information about the abilities universities are expected to teach to students. The information in these passages comes from the academics' interviews.

20 Teaching of values and attitudes

This category is about the values that are expected to be taught through university education according to the interviews given by academics.

21 Values and attitudes

This category includes those values and attitudes reported as acquired or reinforced through university life such as: responsibility, maturity, discipline, independence, collaborative work, competitiveness, effort, autonomous learning, and aspirations .

4.1.2 Pattern coding

In the process of pattern coding the categories were reduced to 18 in total. The categories in this stage have been through more refinement and have reached the saturation point (Flick, 1998) where no new information is emerging that can inform the categories created. The final list of categories is arranged in the following order according to the sources analyzed:

List of categories in students' accounts:

Family project

Job opportunities

Knowledge as an asset

Participation in society

Social distinction

Socializing

Students' expectations and positive views

Students' negative views and criticisms

Values and attitudes

List of categories in the academics' interviews:

Students' expected profile

Role of HEIs

A new type of university

Academics perception of students

Teaching of abilities

Role of culture

Academics criticisms of the educational system

List of categories in the official documents:

Role and responsibilities of universities

Educational offer made by the universities

The expected profile of students and graduates

4.2 Students' views

The main themes or categories found in the students' texts are shown below arranged from the most recurrent to the least as specified by the percentage value. This percentage represents the amount of coded passages to a specific theme in the sample of 349 manuscripts.

Themes in students' accounts	Documents coded /349	Percentage
Values and attitudes related to HE	231	66.18%
Knowledge as an asset	188	53.86%
Education as social distinction	163	46.70%
Socialising	155	44.41%
Students' expectations and positive views	106	30.32%
Job opportunities	105	30.08%
Students' negative views and criticisms	70	20.05%
Education as a family project	65	18.62%
Students' participation in society	32	9.16%

Table 3 Thematic categories in students' accounts 111

4.2.1 Values and attitudes related to HE

As this research was conducted in Spanish, I have provided a translation for the quotations used for illustration in this chapter. The translation as well as the quotes are indented and have a different font for easier recognition. The source of each quote has also been provided identifying the university the students came from, gender, field of study, also whether they were local or foreign students. A key to the codes used to identify them can be found in the footnote to this page.⁹

The category which was most recurrent in the students' writings refers to what students wrote about **values and attitudes**. Sometimes these values and attitudes were referred to as acquired in the university; other times they were said to be reinforced by being in the university. Among the answers, these were the most recurrent words associated with values and attitudes: *responsibility, maturity, discipline, independence, collaborative work, competitiveness, autonomous learning*.

The theme of *responsibility* is referred to mostly as a value students acquire through their time in university. In Britain going to the university away from home could be considered as an understood 'must.' There are even policies that protect this habit and

⁹ U: Student from a public university

T: Student from a private university

A: Student from social science

B: Student from science

F: Student who is from out of town, either from a different city or a different country.

L: Student who lives in the same State (Nuevo Leon)

M: Male student

F: Female student

have loans for maintenance different from loans for fees. In Mexico, unlike the UK, sometimes parents provide the funds for the students; other times, the students have to work to support themselves. Some students reported acquiring or developing a more responsible attitude towards different areas of their lives as they entered university:

I think university education gives us a very important sense of responsibility which is going to help us not only when we get a job, but also in other areas of our lives.

“Creo que la educación universitaria nos da un sentido de responsabilidad muy importante que nos va a servir no sólo en la rama laboral sino inclusive en nuestras vidas.”¹⁰

For those who go to university in another city, this may imply that they need to be more responsible in organizing their lives away from home and with no parental supervision. For example:

For instance, for me it is much better to be here in Monterrey as a foreign student, because that way you learn to be responsible, to manage your own house without any supervision.

“Por ejemplo, para mí es mucho mejor estar aquí en Monterrey como estudiante foráneo ya que aprendes la responsabilidad de llevar tu casa en orden sin que nadie te diga qué hacer.”¹¹

In other cases, *responsibility* was also mentioned as an acquired attitude since it was needed as the university activities and the demands to study. This was seen as an added pressure to the students by forcing them to be better organized. This aspect was later related to the theme of ‘negative views’ students associate with university life as they complained there was too much to do and they had to behave more responsibly to be able to cope with it. This complaint came mainly as a reason for not having enough time for social activities.

¹⁰ (Document TBFL022: Local, science, private university, female student).

¹¹ (Document TAMF006: Foreign, social science, private university, male student).

Discipline and *maturity*, along with *responsibility*, were two more values mentioned as acquired and reinforced through the different activities in which they were involved in the university. Sometimes they reported this as a need in the case of *responsibility* and *maturity*; other times, they reported *discipline* as a gain or consequence of being in the university. The following lines illustrate the above.

Responsibility: studies make me be more responsible and disciplined.

“Responsabilidad: Los estudios o la carrera me hace que sea más responsable y disciplinado.”¹²

Maturity: When you finish your studies, you have a vision of what work life will be like; you can earn your own money with your own job.

“Madurez: Al terminar la carrera, uno tiene la visión de lo que será la vida trabajando, de ganarte tu dinero con tu trabajo.”¹³

When students talked about the work they do at university, they mentioned learning to work in teams and autonomously as something they acquire and develop through the type of activities assigned in their classes. Along with this idea of collaborative work they mentioned learning to be competitive as well as the amount of effort they put into their studies.

Teamwork assignments: they teach you how to learn to work in groups.

“Trabajos en equipo: Te ayudan a aprender a trabajar en equipo.”¹⁴

Teamwork: In this society we do not live alone and we need each other to

12 (Document UBML080: Local, science, public university, male student).

13 (Document UAFL035: Local, social science, public university female student).

14 (Document TBFF063: Foreign, science, private university, female student).

advance.

“Trabajo en equipo: En esta sociedad no vivimos solos y necesitamos unos de otros para avanzar.”¹⁵

By looking at how students say values and attitudes may influence other areas in their lives, it seems important to reflect on the importance students give to acquiring and /or reinforcing these values during their university years. It may also suggest that they see the institutions as responsible for this teaching, in raising their expectations for them. The analysis of the academics' interviews and the official documents will also throw some light on this issue, as we will see later in the chapter. One of the questions that came to my mind after analysing this category was how a high emphasis on values and attitudes would influence the way students (re)created their identity. Another question was why students were choosing this category of values and attitudes more frequently than others.

4.2.2 Knowledge as an asset

Knowledge as an asset acquired through HE was the second category (53.85%) and the notions that this category mainly referred to are rather utilitarian. The idea is that education is a tool, that knowledge acquired through university would serve as the basis that would give students the capacity to do other things, to follow other projects. The air of utilitarianism involved in this concept of knowledge could be seen in the way students refer to it sometimes as a 'step', 'preparation' 'a tool for the future' (*'Herramienta para el futuro'*), among others, as it is illustrated in the following quote:

Tools: university education is important for me because it gives me the necessary tools to develop myself professionally in a world where the best opportunities are only for those who have the best academic preparation.

¹⁵ (Document TAFF013: Foreign, Social science, private university, female student).

“Herramientas: La educación universitaria es importante para mí ya que ésta me proporcionará las herramientas necesarias para desenvolverme profesionalmente en el mundo donde las mejores oportunidades son sólo para aquellos que cuentan con la mejor preparación.”¹⁶

As to considering knowledge as ‘preparation’, sometimes it meant preparation to continue future studies, yet in most cases, it meant preparation for a job. One interesting connection between preparation and the way one student saw how that would influence his personality is found in these lines:

Preparation: I chose this word because university education is a preparation for the future of a student, giving him the appropriate personality to succeed in the future.

“Preparación: Esta palabra la escogí por que la educación universitaria es una preparación para el futuro de un alumno, dándole la personalidad adecuada para sobresalir en el futuro.”¹⁷

A common combination of thoughts related to this category was abilities, future and success. Seeing education as a way to acquire abilities, students seem to have high hopes for a better future with opportunities for a successful job and happy life. In the Spanish language, one of the connotations for the word ‘cultura’ (culture) is *knowledge*, thus being more ‘culto’ (cultured) means you are more educated, have more abilities and are better equipped for a brighter future. These ideas are echoed in the following words:

Future: because these 4 and a half years are going to be the springboard for

16 (Document UBMF071: Foreign, science, public university, male student).

17 (Document TAMF008: Foreign, Soc. science, private university, male student).

me to develop more culturally and professionally. This is going to determine my life in the future.

“Futuro: Porque estos 4 años y medio son el trampolín para desarrollarme culturalmente, profesionalmente. Es lo que va a marcar mis años de adulto.”¹⁸

The previous statement gives the impression that, for this student, what they do, learn, acquire or fail to do in their years in the university, will determine their future life. The way students seem to rely on the education and preparation they are receiving in universities and how much of their lives this seems to influence made me think of the type of identity that university education and environment seem to encourage. Is this creating an identity of people who rely on the power of their knowledge in order to feel successful in other areas of their lives? This is an issue I will return to in the discussion chapter as notions of ‘the knowledge society’ may prove useful to discuss these findings in more detail. Students bet on the knowledge they get in higher education, and they bet high. I would like to close the paragraph on this category of knowledge using one of the students’ quotes.

A step: I see university education as a step to help me reach my goals in life and be able to realise myself as a person.

“Escalón: La educación universitaria la veo yo como un escalón para alcanzar las metas que nos proponemos en nuestra vida y poder realizarnos como personas.”¹⁹

4.2.3 Education as social distinction

The category of **social distinction** was among the highest, with 46.70% of documents

¹⁸ (Document TAMF014: Foreign, soc. science, private university, male student).

¹⁹ (Document UAFL057: Local, social science, public university, female student).

coded with this theme. This category represents those students' opinions that catalogued education as: status, prestige, recognition, difference, superiority, class flight, social mobility, being better informed and more knowledgeable, among the most common.

As we move along the categories, the links seem to appear more frequently. The category of social distinction is frequently linked with that of having more knowledge (social asset) or 'being cultured' as well as with the fact that it should open more opportunities, more money and guarantee a better future. As the two categories are put together, the 'package of benefits' education may bring to students grows and so do their expectations. This progressive link of themes will be discussed in the last part of this chapter.

The category of **social distinction** was originally assigned the name of 'status.' However, as the coding progressed, different ideas related to status and social recognition appeared and the category was expanded to make it more inclusive. The idea that education produces a higher social status was still a salient one and I realized students were referring to this idea using different words. The following are some examples where the words 'status', 'prestige', and 'superiority' are used in that sense:

Social status: you get a better social level; people look at you as someone different and not just like any ordinary person.

*"Status social: Obtienes un mejor nivel social, la gente te mira como alguien diferente y no como uno del montón."*²⁰

Status: Because it represents a (distinctive) level in our society nowadays.

*"Estatus: Porque representa un nivel en las sociedades actuales."*²¹

20 (Document TAMF005: Foreign, soc. science, private university, male student).

21 (Document TAFF033: Foreign, social science, private university, female student).

Prestige: This is related (to Higher Education) because it implies a great effort to be in a university and to be able to get the education I need to improve myself and have prestige and stability in the future.

“Prestigio: Pues están relacionadas porque es un gran esfuerzo estar en una universidad para poder obtener la educación que necesito para superarme y en un futuro tener prestigio y un futuro estable.”²²

Superiority: The desire for superiority or to feel better than others is not on the personal level, rather, it is related to where I want to work and university education gives me the tools to be better, to have more ‘status’ when I am looking for a job.

“Superioridad: El deseo de superioridad o sentirse mejor que otros no es por el hecho de persona, más bien es por el ser superior en lo que deseo trabajar, y la educación universitaria da las herramientas para ser mejor, tener más “status” al querer buscar trabajo.”²³

Pride in being socially ‘different’ or ‘higher’ is also associated with this category of social distinction. Some students reported feeling a sense of pride by being the only or the first member of the family to have a university degree. Others wrote about feeling proud after getting their university degree after making a great effort.

a. Pride: because I am the only one in the family who will graduate from a university outside Honduras.

b. Pride: Because of the effort you need to make to get a university degree and

22 (Document TAFL016: Local, social science, private university, female student).

23 (Document TAFF001: Foreign, soc. science, private university, female student).

be recognized.

a. “Orgullo: Pues soy la única en mi familia que se graduará de una universidad fuera de Honduras.”²⁴

b. “Orgullo: Por el esfuerzo que se tiene que dar para poder lograr un título y ser reconocido.”²⁵

Being regarded by others as *different* and *superior* is a sign of social recognition (Jenkins, 1996). It may indicate that you are a person with more education, a better job, and most likely, a better standard of life. What is implicit here to some extent is the idea that university education brings not only opportunities for a better job and thus a better life, but that it also influences the way you see yourself in a group of ‘others’ as much as how they see you. The feelings of superiority mentioned above also act as a reminder that you have a better level in society as well. This idea of the influence of the perception of ‘others’ in the construction of a person’s identity has been explored by researchers like Richard Jenkins (1996) whose model of social identity underlines ‘social recognition’ as part of the dynamic construction of an individual’s identity. The implications of this in the development of my research will be part of the discussion in chapter five.

4.2.4 Education and socialising

The following section is about education as a means for socialising and how students report making friends, getting to know more people and establishing some networks as a benefit of their years in university. One interesting aspect is the relationship I found between this category and the idea that making friendships is an asset.

24 (Document TBFF024: Foreign, science, private university, female student).

25 (Document UBFL008: Local, science, public university, female student).

“Amigos, amistades, conecciones” (friends, friendships, connections) are commonly reported words in this category. There were two types of situations where students wrote about friends: those who were their friends then and will probably be in the future, and those who they meet in university and perhaps will represent a ‘good’ contact in the future. The first group seems to report friendships made because they go together to the same classes or they are assigned similar projects. They also mention the fact that they share common interests and perhaps belong to the same club or student association.

“Friends: They are a consequence because you relate to each other as you study and work together at the university.”

Amigos: Los amigos son consecuencia de estar estudiando, colaborando y relacionándose en la universidad.²⁶

Foreign students wrote about friends and socializing as a way of coping with the difficulties of living away from home. For them to ‘socialise’ is not only to make friends but sometimes to have the feeling of a family, to find support.

I think friends are of great help emotionally speaking and this is the time where you meet people who can be of great influence in your future.

“Creo que son de muchísima ayuda emocional y éste es el tiempo donde conoces más gente que puede ser de influencia en tu futuro.”²⁷

The second group of answers indicates that there are several interests involved in making a friend at university, therefore giving socializing an interesting twist. Students repeatedly reported that socializing in university was good because the friends you

²⁶ (Document UBML052: Local, science, public university, male student).

²⁷ (Document TAFL025: Local, social science, private university, female student).

made there could be of ‘help’, or ‘benefit’, in the future, especially to get a job. The following comment illustrates this case:

Connections: By this I mean that as we advance in our degree, it could be that our colleagues and better friends may get very important jobs in the future.

“Relaciones: Con relaciones me refiero a que a como avanzamos, puede ser que los compañeros y mejores amigos más adelante obtengan puestos importantes.”²⁸

People: You get to know all kinds of people who share your same interests and whom you could get some benefit from.

“Gente: Se conoce a todo tipo de gente de lo cual muchas veces tiene los mismos intereses que tú y se puede sacar algún provecho.”²⁹

Another aspect included in this category of socializing is the fact that students talked about it as a way to help them cope with the hard work and tensions experienced in university. Clubs and extracurricular activities and sports, are often mentioned as ways to socialize and to look for an escape from the tensions in their studies:

Extra curricular activities for me have been an anti-stress, like taking up vegetarian cooking, yoga or aerobics.

“Actividades extra-académicas: Actividades extra-académicas han sido para mí un anti-stress, como la han sido la cocina vegetariana y el yoga o aeróbic...”³⁰

To practice sports so you can spend time with other people and be fit.

28 (Document TAMF002: Foreign, social science, private university, male student).

29 (Document UAFL012: Local, social science, public, female student).

30 (Document TAML039: Local, social science, private university, male student).

“Hacer deporte para convivir con otras personas y estar en condición.”³¹

Making friends for support, to spend time together, to join clubs and be fit as well as for making connections that could be useful in the future were the relevant ideas students related to university education. The social network that students establish during their university life seems to offer them the emotional support they need in order to cope with the demands of university studies. It also seems to work as a link to their future jobs. In recent discussions, Robert Putnam (2004) has pointed out that in some areas of work, a ‘connection’ works better than a university degree. This brings an interesting point of discussion because students rated socialising as an important gain in higher education (44.41%) just after social distinction, which could relate to the fact that social recognition would increase depending on the connections made. I shall revisit this issue in the discussion chapter.

4.2.5 High expectations and positive views about HE

The next category is related to the positive views and feelings students related to their lives as university students. Concepts like pride, satisfaction, personal realization, freedom and independence, as well as high expectations of their university degree are part of it. The ideas of pride and personal satisfaction here show a link with that category of social distinction discussed before. Being recognized as ‘university graduates’ in the future seems to bring students a sense of satisfaction. In the cases of returning students, for example, setting an example for their children is also an important issue.

To be an example in life and show the girls that a degree should not be left unfinished, that whatever you start, you must finish.

³¹ (Document TBFF008: Foreign, science, private university, female student).

“Ejemplo de vida... para demostrar que las carreras no se deben dejar a medias, que todo lo que se empieza se debe terminar y servir de ejemplo para las muchachas.”³²

Whatever the circumstances, the fact that having a university degree is socially highly rated seems to inspire other positive feelings in students along with high expectations of their lives after graduation. For example, a feeling of being ‘capable’ of doing more things seems to come from the fact that somebody has ‘survived’ the university.

Capacity: If I survive TEC, I will have the knowledge and will feel responsible and capable enough to do my job.

“Capacidad: Si sobrevivo en el TEC sé que tengo los conocimientos, soy suficientemente responsable y capaz de realizar mi trabajo.”³³

According to the students’ reports, coming to university gives a sense of independence and freedom. Some of the responses from female students, for example, showed how much they rely on their education to feel independent and secure.

Security: University education transforms me into someone more sure of myself thanks to the knowledge and experiences that I will be able to use tomorrow to defend and support myself.

“Seguridad: Me convierte en una persona más segura de mí misma gracias al conocimiento y experiencias adquiridas sé que el día de mañana me puedo defender, mantener, etc.”³⁴

A female student referred to education as ‘useful’, besides interesting, because maybe in

³² (Document UAFL055: Local, social science, public university, female student).

³³ (Document TBFL140: Local, science, private university, female student).

³⁴ (Document TBFL109: Local, science, private university, female student).

the future, being a woman and housewife, she would need to work in and out of the home:

Useful: It is interesting to study because you learn about other parts of Mexico; it is also useful because maybe in the future you may need to have to work (being a woman and a housewife).

Útil: Es interesante estudiar porque se aprende de otras partes de México; también es útil estudiar porque a lo mejor en un futuro se te puede llegar a ofrecer que tengas necesidades de trabajar (siendo mujer y ama de casa).”³⁵

As previously pointed out in the category of ‘education as an asset’, students place high expectations on their university education: a well-paid job, better standards of living, more freedom and independence, respect, etc. In their answers, students write as if by getting a university degree they were given the key to ‘The Promised Land’ of successful graduates. Considering the realities of the labor market where only 1 out of 3 graduates can find a job related to their degree (Molina, 2004) could bring a different light to this issue as will be provided in the following chapter. However, not everything leads to positive expectations in the students’ answers; a balancing category to the one just presented above includes the students’ complaints and criticisms of their university education.

4.2.6 Negative views and criticisms of HE

In their evaluation of the education system, students’ complaints were more oriented to the way the system worked in terms of assigning them extra work and making them sacrifice their social life; fewer of those responses criticized the system as a whole. In

35 (Document TAFL020: Local, social science, private university, female student)

the private university, their answers were centred on issues like excessive homework and work in teams as well as use of technology. In the public one, students pointed out the poor quality of labs and limited materials as well as not having enough time to do all the work they were assigned.

Words like ‘tension’, ‘stress’ ‘pressure’ and ‘disappointment’ inspired strong complaints from students who wrote of the effort and extra time put into their studies, virtually killing their social life. Tension and pressure were associated with academic work and more closely to exams and the interest in getting the best marks. Perhaps this is connected to the idea of producing competitive professionals, which is highly emphasized in the universities’ mission statements as we shall see later in the chapter.

Tension: There is great tension to get the best marks.

“Tensión: Se mantiene una gran tensión para sacar las mejores calificaciones.”³⁶

Pressure: There is a lot of pressure every time we have a term exam or a final. In the end, you need to work day after day, year after year to be able to succeed.

“Presión: Hay mucha presión por cada examen parcial o final. Por último, se requiere de trabajo constante día a día, año tras año, para poder salir adelante.”³⁷

³⁶ (Document TBFF019: Foreign, science, private university, female student).

³⁷ (Document TBML085: Local, science, private university, male student).

In the public university where some students are part-time or full time workers, time seems to be an issue that puts pressure on them. In their cases, their view on higher education is closely linked to pressure and lack of time to do the work required by their lectures.

Time: This is another important factor because most of us work and sometimes engineers (lecturers) put a lot of pressure on us.

“Tiempo: Es otro factor importante ya que casi la mayoría trabaja y a veces es demasiada la presión por parte de los ingenieros.”³⁸

For ‘foreign students’, for example, going to university in a different town, higher education seems to represent sacrifices, like leaving their friends and families.

The sacrifice we need to make to leave some things you enjoy doing in order to dedicate more time to your studies; you leave for example, friends, hours of sleep and sometimes your family if you study in a different city.

“El sacrificio de dejar algunas cosas que te gusta hacer para dedicar tiempo al estudio, por ejemplo, los amigos, horas de sueño y tal vez la familia si estudias en otro Estado.”³⁹

While some students seemed to show more complaints about things that affected them on a more ‘personal level’, others complained about issues that were more related to the way education was organized at the universities, the quality of teaching and the frustration at the poor interaction they had with lecturers. Allusions to these negative experiences can be read in the following comments:

38 (Document UBFL089: Local, science, public university, female student).

39 (Document UAFL034: Local, social science, public university, female student).

Disappointment: There is disappointment in the little or zero interest lecturers have in how much the students are learning.

“Decepción: El poco o nada de compromiso que existe por parte de los maestros hacia los alumnos en lo que se refiere a la enseñanza.”⁴⁰

There is anxiety and frustration in students when they write about the way some lecturers interact with them and how students disapprove of that. The type of hierarchical structure that operates in certain classes seems to put students and lecturers in a position of advantage/disadvantage, creating a barrier or obstacle that students cannot ignore. In the following comment, there is even an air of irony when the student talks about what university education is in theory and what it is in practice.

The main concept is good and sounds nice, unfortunately, in practice, a lot gets lost. As we go through “HIGHER EDUCATION” sadly enough we realize that we are still the students vs. teachers. There is still this ‘barrier’ in which the teacher continues to have absolute power and will never listen to the requests or comments of a student. Instead of being a comfortable and nice environment, it is an environment of stress and anxiety, because teachers seem to regard each student just as a number rather than a person who is trying to learn.

“El concepto principal es muy bonito y suena muy bien, por desgracia a la hora de ponerla en práctica se pierde mucho de la idea original. Conforme cursamos la “EDUCACIÓN UNIVERSITARIA”, tristemente nos damos cuenta que seguimos siendo alumnos vs. maestros, sigue existiendo esa “barrera” en la que el maestro sigue teniendo poder absoluto y no cederá ante las peticiones o comentarios del alumno. En vez de ser un ambiente cómodo y agradable, es un

40 (Document UBMF029: Foreign, science, public university, female student).

ambiente de angustia y estrés, por el hecho de que los maestros parece interesarles más “un número en la lista” que el alumno realmente aprenda los conocimientos impartidos.”⁴¹

Another peculiar note from a student is about stress. He emphasizes that despite the high stress they have to cope with in university, it is sad that education does not guarantee prosperity in the future. His disappointment reads as follows:

Stress: the worst part is that all this (education) does not guarantee prosperity in the future anymore, because there are no more job opportunities for us. And if you are planning to set up a business, watch out for the globalization of the transnational companies! To have a university degree does not mean much anymore.

“Estrés: Lo más triste es que todo esto ya no nos garantiza prosperidad en el futuro, pues ya no hay trabajo ni oportunidades para todos nosotros. Y si pones un negocio, aguas! Con la globalización de las multinacionales! Tener un título ya no significa gran cosa.”⁴²

High tuition fees, for example, were a complaint mainly from the private university students and there was mention of feeling exploited because of the inadequate training of the staff and the apparent motivation of people going to that private university.

Fraud: I think that the educational system is a fraud because most people who go to TEC are not looking for personal growth but they just want to get a degree to be able to run the family businesses.

41 (Document UBMF090: Foreign, science, public university, male student).

42 (Document TBML009: Local, science, private university, male student).

“Fraude: Yo pienso que el sistema educativo es un fraude porque la mayoría de personas que van en el TEC no buscan mucho la superación personal sino solamente conseguir un título para hacerse cargo de los negocios familiares.”⁴³

Expenses: For me, it (university education) means an excessive expense when I think of the low quality of teaching and the lack of equipment to do practice in the labs.

“Gastos: Me representa gastos a veces excesivos por la poca calidad de impartición de clases por parte de los ingenieros y a veces la falta de equipo para poder practicar o las áreas de laboratorio.”⁴⁴

While some of the criticisms in this category may sound harsh, the positive views still outranked the complaints (106 vs. 70 coded passages), suggesting that more students were happy with the system the way it was. Looking at their answers, one could also ask why only a few wrote strong complaints, especially when some of those complaints refer to issues that could be affecting almost every student, i.e. high tuition fees, poor teaching quality and lack of interaction with staff. A question here would be not why so relatively few wrote about it, but why so many remained silent. Some of the hypothetical answers could be that students were afraid of giving their opinions for fear of retaliation; another would be that they saw no point in complaining because things would not change anyway (conformist). A third reason could be that perhaps they are used to seeing the system function that way so it feels normal for them to be in a system that works that manner. Perhaps they cannot visualise a different system because this has always been like that, and they have not seen any other. These are all hypothetical thoughts that will be discussed later on in the next chapter.

43 (Document TBMF015: Foreign, science, private university, male student).

44 (Document UBML051: Local, science, public university, male student).

4.2.7 Education as a family project

In the following theme students related the concept of higher education to family. I have defined this category as 'education as a family project' Whether as children or parents, students responses showed a tendency to relate education not only as a personal project but as a family one. In their answers, students brought together feelings of pride as well as tension, and sometimes pressure to be a good example for the children in the family.

Another connection with this theme of family was the responsibility some students felt for repaying their families for the efforts made to support them through university. Students reported on this relationship in terms of reparation to parents or close relatives. The words 'sacrifice' and 'effort' in this category were usually linked to the economic support students were receiving from their family. They wrote about how they intended to pay the family back by sharing the benefits of the social and economic status they would achieve once they graduated. This is a recurrent topic in the answers given by the students from the public university whose family income tends to be low. A special mention to God is made by the following student when writing about the sacrifice the parents have made to send her to school:

Last, I want to thank GOD and my parents because they have allowed me to be in a university like this, because I have learned a lot of things from different people and I think I will continue to learn more.

“Por último le doy gracias a DIOS y a mis padres por haberme permitido estar en una universidad como ésta, porque aquí he aprendido muchas cosas de muchas personas y creo que lo seguiré haciendo.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ (Document TBML026: Local, science, private university, male student).

As in the theme of social distinction, pride is associated with making the family proud by graduating.

Pride: for me but mainly for my parents, so they feel proud of me.

“Orgullo: Tanto para mí pero sobretodo para que mis padres se sientan orgullosos.”⁴⁶

The fact that I will be able to hold an engineering degree, makes both my family and me proud.

“Orgullo: Es un orgullo para mí y para mi familia la razón de tener la posibilidad de poder llegar a ser ingeniero.”⁴⁷

Another word associated with family and the idea of repayment is investment.

Help my parents: give some help to my parents, repaying all they have done for me.

“Ayuda a padres: Dar una ayuda a mis padres, regresándoles todo lo que ellos han hecho por mí.”⁴⁸

One idea found in the category of ‘education as a family project’ related to the issue of social class was that of using a university degree as a way of social flight.

Progress: ; this later meant progress because there is nobody in the family with a university degree, and this turned into better income (for the family).

46 (Document UBFL043: Local, science, public university, female student).

47 (Document UBML052: Local, science, public university, male student).

48 (Document UAFL048: Local, social science, public university, female student).

“Progreso: Esto después significó progreso, porque en la familia no hay alguien universitario y esto por ende en buenos ingresos.”⁴⁹

The notion of class flight is not directly mentioned as such in the students’ words, however their choice of words like ‘bienestar’ (social welfare), ‘progresar’ (to make progress), ‘salir adelante’ (to move ahead) indicated that one of their interest in doing a university degree is moving up the social ladder. Students from both institutions mentioned this as a priority regardless of the social class they seemed to belong or the type of income they would have in their families. In this way, the idea of class flight is expressed as a personal goal as well as a family one. In this case where the student is the head of the family, there are personal as well as family expectations on obtaining the degree:

Family: All the work and effort I put in, I do it for my family, to help them make progress and so that they feel proud of me as a head of the family, father, son and friend.

Familia: Todo este trabajo y esfuerzo lo realizo en mi caso por mi familia para sacarlos adelante y que sientan orgullo de mi como cabeza de familia y como padre de familia, hijo y amigo.”⁵⁰

The idea of education as a family project connects other concepts like family traditions and close family ties.

Support for the family: having a university degree so in the future I can support myself and my family...

“Sustento para la familia: El estudio de una carrera profesional para en un

49 (Document UAFL001: Local, social science, public university, female student).

50 (Document TBFF121: Foreign, science, private university, female student).

futuro conseguir el sustento para mi y mi familia...”⁵¹

The concept of ‘family’ found in the students from the private university is usually connected to the future family (spouse and children) and so they talk about education helping them in supporting their future family or helping them start a new family. In the case of students from the public university, their idea of family is usually linked to their parents and siblings, whom they feel they need to repay for what they have invested in their university education. There is also a sense of moral obligation to make them proud, especially if they are the first to graduate from a university in the family. A possible interpretation of this is that students from the private universities usually come from higher income families and the repayment is perhaps not as important or necessary. In the case of the students from the public universities who come from less privileged families, perhaps repaying is not only a matter of moral obligation but a necessity and implicit expectation.

4.2.8 Participation in society

The idea of improving the society by being educated people and making an impact using their university education was what I classified as ‘participation in society.’ This was the least common theme touched on in students’ responses mentioned (in only 9.16% of documents) and the answers showed different degrees of commitment from students. There were some cases where students explicitly mentioned the idea that they would be able to help their society or community by being more educated. An inspiring answer from one of the students captures this view:

I think that (university education) would be very useful to improve my country... to eliminate poverty and give Mexicans a decent way of living. To

51 (Document TBMF052: Foreign, science, private university, male student).

finish with the imbalance found between the social classes.

“Creo que me será útil para mejorar el país, para acabar con los rezagos en las clases sociales, acabar con la pobreza y darle una vida digna a los mexicanos. Acabar con el desequilibrio en las clases sociales.”⁵²

One of my initial interests in this study was to see whether students would write about themselves as agents of change. The following response directly addressed my interest:

Factor of change: Education, beyond being an essential part of my life, will have an effect on the people I come in contact with.

“Factor de cambio: La educación, más allá de ser parte esencial de mi vida, tendrá repercusión en las personas con quien tendré contacto.”⁵³

In a similar tone, the following comment shows how the students may feel capable of making better judgments taking into account all the different perspectives. This relates to Rogers’ (1996: 36) concept of students’ engaging in making ‘mature judgments/developing sense of perspective’, and changing things with what they know. This student talks about promoting social change through making different decisions, adapting new perspectives and using them in the society.

Social change: I mean the decisions I can make at this stage of my life and the different perspectives that I can acquire as well as what I can do with them in my society.

“Cambio social: Me refiero a los juicios que puedo realizar dentro de esta etapa y las diferentes perspectivas que se adquieren y todo lo que puedo realizar con ellas en mi sociedad.”⁵⁴

52 (Document TAFL027: Local, social science, private university, female student.)

53 (Document TAMF015: Foreign, social science, private university, male student.)

54 (Document TAMF042: Foreign, social science, private university, male student.)

To collaborate with the community: By applying what you have learned through university, you can make proposals to help your community.

“Colaborar con la comunidad: Al ejercer con responsabilidad lo aprendido en la Universidad propones una ayuda a la comunidad.”⁵⁵

An interesting finding within this category was that more female (56.2%) than male (43.7%) students wrote about how they would participate more and help their country or community by being better educated. Gender differences will be discussed in the next chapter. Some saw in their personal improvement a way to advance the country in general.

Improvement: During this time (university days), it means improvement for you and for the education in Mexico because if more and more people have a higher degree of education, the country will improve.

“Superación: En esta etapa para ti, y para la escuela, para la educación en México, si las personas tienen un nivel más alto en educación, el país se supera.”⁵⁶

In the minds of other students, there was the idea of paying back to society what they received in terms of education.

Responsibility: I have the responsibility to be a better for myself, my family and to my community offering the knowledge I have.

“Compromiso: Compromiso conmigo misma, con mi familia, con la sociedad de

55 (Document UBML038: Local, science, public university, male student).

56 (Document UAFL040: Local, social science, public university female student)

*ser mejor persona, de ofrecer mis conocimientos.*⁵⁷

Summarizing what was found in terms of students' participation in society, what became apparent was that this was not an issue commonly found in the students' accounts. While this may suggest that students are not interested in promoting the social mobility of their communities through their education, it may also be that the way in which they write about this participation is more at the personal level, extending to the family, sometimes, and not explicitly to the community or country as a whole. I must admit that in my research interests I had higher expectations of what the students would answer related to participating in society. I was expecting to find a more enthusiastic response and some type of social commitment. As we will see in the next section, my expectations on the students in this aspect were to some extent similar to those of the academic secretaries and to what the mission statements of the university reveal. This may suggest that that the reality students live and their idea of participation in society may differ from what it is expected from them. As opposed to 'think globally, act locally', the students' sense of perspective is narrower, less than local; it is mostly personal, and only at times, it extends to family.

Another possible speculation here would be to analyze how students conceptualize 'participation' in society and if an individual project takes priority over one that is more community orientated due to the different demands students may experience. An analysis of this through the process of individualization of identities in modern societies could prove useful in revealing how students move back and forth between individualized and collectively oriented identities depending on the contexts they are interacting within. This has been pointed out by authors like Anthony Giddens (1997) and will be part of the discussion in the following chapter.

57 (Document UAFL055 : Local, social science, public university, female student).

4.3 Academics' views on HE

As explained in the methodology chapter, in order to see what academics thought of different aspects of higher education, I used a semi-structured interview. I asked them about what they thought the role of higher education was, what issues they saw as important in Higher Education these days, what profile they expected of students, and last, what perception they had of students. The themes developed from their answers as developed in section (4.1.2) are shown in the following table:

Themes	Passages coded/86	Percentage
Students' expected profile	27	31.0%
Role of HEIs	18	18.60%
A new type of university	13	13.95%
Academics' perception of students	12	9.3%
Teaching of abilities and attitudes	12	13.0%
Role of culture	5	6.0%
Criticisms of the educational system	3	3.0%

Table 4 Themes in the academic secretaries' interviews

These thematic categories show not only what they answered to my general questions, but reflected what the academics had in mind about areas I had not prepared questions for, but which were important issues they wanted to talk about.

4.3.1 Students' expected profile

This category includes points of view about the profile academics expected the students to develop either through their stay in university or as graduates. Their answers were based on what the universities were offering to students in terms of developing certain

abilities, values and attitudes. Similar themes were also found in the mission statements as we shall see later on. This is how one of the academics explained what the university wants as a profile for their graduates:

A professional, who is competitive, a problem-solver, with well established values, and self-esteem; who is aware of who he or she is and what mission and vision in life he or she has.

“Un profesional competitivo es una persona pro-activa, propositiva con sus valores muy bien fundamentados, con autoestima, que debe estar consciente de quién es y qué es, cuál es su misión, cuál es su visión.”⁵⁸

Comments like the above talk about some subjective characteristics (well established values, for example) implicit in the profile; however, there are other characteristics of this profile which are more explicit, like certain abilities students need to develop. One example is the English language requirement to be able to graduate:

The student needs to get at least four hundred points in the TOEFL to be able to take the degree examination.

“El muchacho debe demostrar cuatrocientos puntos TOEFL mínimo para poder tener derecho a presentarse su examen profesional.”⁵⁹

Similar explicit answers talking about the students being able to speak three languages, making use of IT and travel abroad as part of their studies, are included in the expected profile.

⁵⁸ (Interview IUB: Public university, science lecturer).

⁵⁹ (Interview IUB: Public university, science lecturer).

As to their involvement with society, academics agreed that this was an important part of the students' profile and that it was even made explicit in the official documents of their universities.

In fact, in the Vision (statement) it says that the students should be an excellent professional, should be competitive at an international level and a person committed to promote the development of their communities.

“De hecho, en la visión está que el alumno debe ser excelente profesional, debe ser competitivo internacionalmente, debe ser una persona comprometida con el desarrollo de sus comunidades.”⁶⁰

Another quote reveals that students should be people who are committed to develop their society

“That they are people...who are sensitive to the changes happening internationally and how they impact on their own community and on their development a individuals.”

“Que sean personas que tengan una visión de compromiso con el desarrollo de su sociedad, comunidad, que sean personas sensibles a los cambios internacionales, y sensibles al impacto que estos cambios tienen en su propia comunidad, en su desarrollo como individuo.”⁶¹

An interesting answer from one of the academics referring to the expected profile is the fact that it has been always ideal. According to this academic, regardless of the time we were talking about, universities had always promoted a type of ideal profile which now needed to be enriched with a more productive, creative and realistic view.

The profile that is looked for in the private universities and in the Faculties has always been ideal; that is, it is typical of students to be critical, in the sense

⁶⁰ (Interview ITB: Private university, science lecturer).

⁶¹ (Interview ITA: Private university, social science lecturer).

that they check, question, in order to support what they know taking a critical position. Now this profile needs to be enriched with a more productive and creative sense...Now they have to be proactive.

“El (perfil) que se pretende formar en lo particulares y en las facultades siempre ha sido un ideal, es decir, tradicional de que sea un estudiante crítico, en el sentido de que revise, que reconstruya, que cuestione, que refundamente el conocimiento con el sentido crítico. Ahora este perfil crítico tiene que ser más enriquecido, tiene que ser enriquecido con un sentido más productivo y más creativo...ahora se tiene que ser propositivo.”⁶²

In general terms, the way academics talked about this profile reflected, to a great extent, what the universities “sell” in their mission statements. I found that the academics from the public-funded universities were more open to see both the realistic and idealistic point of view in this profile. The academics from the privately-funded university talked of this profile as a guaranteed product after students graduated from their universities.

4.3.2 The role of HE and the new type of university

Although in the analysis categories these two themes were separated, for the purpose of discussion, I have put them together given that during the interviews academics went back and forth between one topic and the other in their answers. When they talked about the characteristics of a new type of university, they described it either as a model that was operating already, compared to traditional models, or as one that was in their vision and needed to start operating soon in order to meet the needs of university education nowadays. The model they talked about includes notions of changes in the curriculum, in teachers' role and students' role. Phrases like ‘system of tutoring’, ‘competency-based curriculum’, ‘certification of skills’, etc. which are all relatively new, are included.

⁶² (Interview IUA: Public university, social science lecturer).

As to the changes in the curriculum and new roles for teachers and students, one academic said it was a whole new model where the teacher, the material, the teaching techniques revolved around the student making the best use of technology.

It is a model where the teacher, the material and the didactic techniques work around the students, using technology to its maximum potential.

“Es todo un modelo tanto el maestro, el material, las técnicas didácticas, gira alrededor del alumno aprovecha al máximo el potencial de la tecnología.”⁶³

In relation to more changes in the teacher’s roles, one academic linked globalization tendencies in the way academics now are not only teaching, but offering tutoring and participating in research as part of their academic responsibilities. This diversification in the job is apparently aiming to make it more professional.

Universities change their schemes towards globalization in which the role of the teacher it is not merely to lecture the students but also to participate in actions like tutoring, researching, leading projects, as part of their duties.

“Las universidades cambian sus esquemas a una globalización, en la cual la función del docente no es únicamente ir e impartir cátedra a sus alumnos, sino también hacer la difusión, la gestión, la tutoría, la investigación, como parte de su quehacer.”⁶⁴

63 (Interview ITB: Private university, science lecturer).

64 (Interview IUB: Public university, science lecturer).

This previous idea is linked with what another academic said about the new profile of the universities. According to him, now the universities have entered in this process of certification and quality control and this is affecting most areas of the university life, from curriculum design to the professionalisation of their academics. The search for international accreditation is again another hallmark of this culture of “quality” control.

The most recent [change] would be the search for quality and all that it entails...quality, recognition, accreditations, selection processes, accountability, all that is implied or notes in the definition of quality.

“Lo más reciente sería la búsqueda de la calidad, la carrera de la calidad, y todo lo que es... calidad, reconocimiento, acreditaciones, selecciones, rendir cuentas, todo eso viene implicado, o viene anotado en el rubro de calidad,”⁶⁵

In terms of changes to the curriculum, some programmes in the new type of university are orientated to the development of competencies: abilities and knowledge, techniques and generally tools that will help the students develop some kind of skills that would allow them to get into the job market with better prospects even before graduating from universities.

The new curriculum is orientated to competencies. While the students are doing their studies, they are simultaneously acquiring different certificates so that they can start getting a better income at the beginning of their career.

“(El nuevo currículo) está dictado a competencias, es decir, en cuanto el alumno va avanzando en sus carrera va automáticamente logrando certificados parciales, de tal manera que pueda ir aumentando sus ingresos iniciales en la carrera...”⁶⁶

65 (Interview IUA: Public university, social science lecturer).

66 (Interview ITB: Private university, science lecturer).

In general, academics seemed to have an enthusiastic attitude towards these changes. However, as they kept talking about the challenges this new university may bring and compared them with the realities they live in their institutions, the complaints appeared, as we will see later in the following paragraphs.

The mission of higher education was a topic introduced in the interview and most of their answers included the idea of a university committed to serve the needs of a changing society and how this brought important challenges for the academics. Talking about what society needs universities for, an academic says it is needed to produce knowledge, to be a centre of knowledge and to produce professionals according to what is known about the society.

“What does society want the university for? To have knowledge, to produce knowledge; for it to be a centre of knowledge, to produce professionals based on the highest standards of knowledge the university has.”

“Para qué quiere la sociedad la universidad? Para que tengan conocimiento, para que produzca conocimiento, para que sea un centro de conocimiento, para que produzca profesionistas en base a los más altos conocimientos que se tiene en la sociedad,”⁶⁷

The university is seen as a producer of professionals highly skilled and with a strong sense of ‘humanity’. They say they want to produce people who have the skills yet who are sensitive to human needs and issues. Along the same lines of what the university does for the society, but as a criticism, one of the academics said that the university cannot continue to be this centre of knowledge and producer of professionals because it is impossible to answer to the needs of an ever-changing society. It cannot be considered a centre of knowledge given the amount of information and resources

⁶⁷ (Interview IUA: Public university, social science lecturer).

students can find outside the universities. According to him, this role is old-fashioned and limited.

But that role (of a centre of knowledge) is limited and falls short; the university cannot produce what a changing market needs, an ever-changing market, and the university cannot be a centre of knowledge given the type of knowledge distribution that we have these days.

“...pero ese papel (de centro del conocimiento) ya está muy a reducción, la universidad no puede producir profesionistas para un mercado cambiante, o tan cambiante, y la universidad no puede ser un centro de conocimiento con los niveles de difusión de conocimiento que se tiene.”⁶⁸

The previous answers show that there seems to be a way to refer to the university as an ‘abstract’ and somehow ‘independent’ entity separated from the society, as if one existed independent from the other. It is again the idea that one is the supplier, while the other one is the recipient; one serves the needs of the other. This distance perceived between both bodies is recurrent not only in the academics’ interviews but in the students’ accounts as well. This way of ‘talking about’ the society disassociating from the university may suggest that in the way they relate to each other there is no interdependence but rather a sense of separation. This disassociation makes it easy to blame or accuse the other for not doing what is expected when it is actually the actions of everyone involved that makes this relationship possible.

This idea of disassociation between the university and other sectors of the society appears as a criticism in the following comment:

68 (Interview IUA: Public university, social science lecturer).

The universities, although they maintain a relationship with the society, often, they stay isolated; one thing is done at the university and another one outside.

“la[s] universidad[es] aunque tiene[n] relaciones con la sociedad muchas veces permanecen muy aisladas, una cosa se hace en la universidad, otras cosas se hacen en el exterior.”⁶⁹

The same theme keeps appearing as the university seems to be not involved in the solution of social problems. Academics complain that the ‘society’ does not get them involved in these issues therefore creating this isolation.

The social problems remain disconnected from the university, problems of transport, urban planning...are real social problems.

“Las problemáticas sociales no involucran a la universidad, problemas de transporte, planificación urbana.... que son realmente problemas sociales.”⁷⁰

In the eyes of the academics, there is a poor link between the different areas of society as much as in the field of education between the national and local academic bodies. One of the problems underlined was the incongruence between the national education policies for access to universities and the reality they live in, in those institutions. According to them, the way the central government aspires to open the university to everyone does not consider the capacity the universities have to enroll students. Therefore, universities end up with more students than they can cope with and the

⁶⁹ (Interview IUA: Public university, social science lecturer).

⁷⁰ (Interview IUA: Public university, social science lecturer).

quality of services provided is affected. In the following answer, one of the academics talks about this lack of congruence:

What happens is that we are in shock also because of the declarations made by the National Plan of Education where they mention a certain amount of students we should admit in the university. Then when we see that ANUIES (Higher Education Regulator) says 20/20 (about the ratio of students per academic), it is totally shocking for us. That means that due to certain reasons, there is a lack of congruence.

“Lo que pasa es que estamos en un ‘shock’ también con las declaraciones del Plan de Educación, donde nos manejan una cantidad de alumnos que debemos aceptar, que entonces, cuando vemos contraste con el Documento ANUIES 20/20 nos choca completamente. O sea, que sucede que por cuestiones de otro tipo no se está dando una coherencia.”⁷¹

The lack of communication and, in a way, of integration between the different sectors involved in the same department of education, plus the perceived isolation of universities, makes academics complaints about the system a real concern reflected in their interviews. These complaints, however, were coming from the public university. The academics from the private one did not express any complaints about the system or the way their university was run.

The next theme in the academics' interviews is that of the teaching of abilities, values and attitudes. According to the academics, teaching these three things is a responsibility of the universities and forms an integral part of the curriculum. Talking on behalf of the institution, an academic reported:

⁷¹ (Interview IUB: Public university, science lecturer).

We are an institution that is moving fast towards incorporating values as a fundamental part in the formation of students as professionals and as persons.

“Nosotros somos una institución en donde nos estamos moviendo rápidamente hacia incorporar los valores como una parte fundamental de la formación de los estudiantes como persona, no nada más como profesionista.”⁷²

In terms of teaching abilities, academics reported teaching students the abilities they will need to be successful and competitive as a challenge:

This brings and generates a commitment to be always alert to which are the knowledge and abilities students need to start developing to be competitive.

“Esto trae y genera un compromiso y estar al pendiente de qué, cuáles son los conocimientos y las habilidades que los alumnos tienen que ir desarrollando para ser competitivos,”⁷³

The way academics seem to feel responsible for creating individuals who are fully prepared to face the challenges of labour market and satisfy the needs of a demanding society suggests that they may perceive students' role as a rather passive one. It sounds as if students were there to be 'fed' with the abilities, values and attitudes they need to face this demanding society and academics were to provide all they needed to make them competitive and successful professionals. To look further into this interest, I asked academics what perception they had about students, whether they saw them as agents of change and involved in social development. Their views are presented in the paragraphs below.

72 (Interview ITA: Private university, social science lecturer).

73 (Interview IUB: Public university, science lecturer).

4.3.3 Academics' perception of students

This last section is about the image academics have of students as they interact with them as either lecturers or heads of departments. Their answers varied and they included what the academics thought of the students' complaints, their role as agents of social change and opinions related to the role of culture in the students' formation and in what they needed to teach them.

A theme I was especially interested in was that of students' agency. I wanted to see how the academics evaluated the students' personal agency and if they saw them as agents of change. Their answers showed how they see students involved in the development of their community as an immediate environment and eventually how they see them as participants in helping develop the country through their education. The general opinion from academics in both universities was that students are more concerned about achieving an individual goal, rather than a social one. The place for the community and country development comes second.

One observation academics make is that they see students as active and dynamic but that this is usually associated with a project for their individual benefit. They see students as agents of change and acknowledge students' leadership and initiative to get involved in projects which promote change; however, they say that their motivation is more for individual goals. They mention how sometimes students get involved in projects like doing social work yet it is only to fulfil a requirement to get their degree or to enrich their CV.

As to working in teams, which is expected to promote collaborative work and reach common goals, one of the academics was doubtful whether this was really teaching students solidarity:

What I perceive is that students are much more individualized, that is, that they have to struggle and be capable by themselves in a competition with others, with working in teams and everything, but working in teams does not mean that he integrates to the team in a collaborative way.

“...lo que yo percibo en lo personal, es que es algo mucho mas individualizado, o sea, tiene que luchar y valerse por sí mismo en una competencia con los demás, con trabajo en equipo y todo, pero la cuestión de trabajar en equipo no quiere decir que se integre solidariamente a un equipo.”⁷⁴

In general, the academics from the privately-funded university reported more on students' involvement than did the public university respondents. In the private institution, academics believed that students had a capacity to set the goals they wanted to achieve after university life. As we saw, students' answers, however, included examples of personal plans such as travelling, working abroad, or doing a postgraduate course in a foreign country. Although the academic's view is positive about students having the capacity (agency) to make changes, in fact, these changes were still directly related to personal projects rather than to social ones.

The last point about how academics perceived students is what they saw as the role of culture and the attitudes students needed to be taught. For some, students were admitted to the university in order for values such as ethics, honesty and discipline to be reinforced and the academics saw the university as the best place to test and encourage such values. For others, these attitudes and values were to be taught, not just reinforced.

A point made by one of the academics about the role of education was that of students needing 'to be rescued'. In his opinion, students came to the university with different motivations and interests and it was the responsibility of the university education to

⁷⁴ (Interview IUA: Public university, social science lecturer).

channel those motivations in the correct direction. This rescue operation could still be done while they were at the university:

Let's remember that students come with very diverse behaviors; some are very introvert while others are extrovert. In a way, we need to generate the mechanisms to be able to control this potential of students and to channel their behavior towards that of a professional.

“Recordemos que los muchachos que vienen con comportamientos muy variados, vienen muy introvertidos, y vienen demasiado extrovertidos, entonces, de alguna manera, tenemos que generar nosotros mecanismos para poder ir controlando este potencial de los muchachos y para poder ir canalizando un comportamiento de profesionista.”⁷⁵

This idea of ‘rescuing’ had to do with channelling the students’ enthusiasm and energy towards ‘good goals.’ Teaching students to use the internet for doing research instead of using it for chats was given as an example.

The role of culture in the views of the academics, in the private university the notion of “Cultura Tec” (Tech Culture) was emphasised as a goal and a gain for students. This concept of ‘culture’ involved values and attitudes of responsibility, punctuality and honesty. One of the academics underlined the importance of acquiring and disseminating this culture among students and staff.

What is the TEC culture? Tolerance, respect for others, plurality, even everyday things like keeping time that we highly value in the formation of a person, in the organisational habits they have, in how they fulfill their duties,

⁷⁵ (Interview IUB: Public university, science lecturer)

let's say there are a series of attitudes and principles as well as norms that have guided our life as an institution.

“¿Qué es la cultura TEC? La tolerancia, el respeto a los demás, la pluralidad, hasta cosas de la vida cotidiana como la puntualidad que consideramos que son muy importantes de la formación de la persona en la organización de sus hábitos de trabajo, en el cumplimiento de sus tareas, digamos que estos son una serie de actitudes y de principios y normas que han regido la vida del instituto.”⁷⁶

Another reference to ‘culture’ was made in the sense that sometimes students’ culture stood in the way of being successful. One of the academics said that the university had to re-educate students into a culture of being proactive and taking initiative because the cultural tendency of Mexican students to wait, to be directed or not to work in collaborative ways, stood in the way of their education.

A big deficiency is that we people do not know how to work in teams, we do not know how to work collaboratively, (we are) too individualistic, or maybe note even that, we are, unwilling to cooperate and unable to trust others...when in Mexico there is no culture of teamwork there is little hope for anything else.

“Una gran deficiencia es que la gente no sabemos trabajar en equipo, no sabemos hacer trabajos colaborativos, muy individuales, ojalá individuales, a veces, este, ya somos medio, desconfiados, reacios, no tenemos confianza en los demás. ...cuando en México no existe esa cultura de ser capaces de trabajar en equipo es muy poco lo que se puede esperar.”⁷⁷

76 (Interview ITA: Private university, social science lecturer).

77 (Interview ITB: Private university, science lecturer).

The views academics have about students tend to point to a more individualised student who, regardless of learning or team working experiences, is faced with competitiveness and individual struggle to be successful. The last view on the lack of ‘collaborative’ culture in the Mexican students, questions the same academics’ ideas that students need to be taught collaborative values and attitudes. Perhaps students are developing this individualised identity in order to cope with the competitiveness required to be the successful professionals they want to be. Perhaps academics and institutions should review a more congruent way of teaching for group effort as well as teaching for an individual goal. These are two more points for discussion in the light of processes of individualisation and identities in modern times. The last part of this chapter brings together what the universities’ official documents report as the mission of such institutions.

4.4 Institutional views

The following findings are related to the analysis of the Mission statements of the two universities where the study was carried out. The three general themes found in this analysis were: the role and responsibilities of the HEIs had towards the society, the educational offer universities made and the profile expected from their students and graduates.

4.4.1 Role and responsibilities of Universities

The theme of role and responsibilities of universities included notions of purposes of the university as well as what they see as their role in society. This was expressed in a single statement: ‘To create, preserve and disseminate culture for the benefit of the

society’⁷⁸. ‘To form competitive people who are committed to the development of their community to improve it in the social, economic and political level’⁷⁹. Other times, it was expressed as a list of objectives they wanted to accomplish: ‘to form professionals, to promote research and artistic creativity, to preserve the cultural heritage’⁸⁰.

4.4.2 Educational offer

The second theme was related to the academic offer universities made to students. This included actions they are taking at the moment as well as future plans. The offer by the public university UANL- reads:

We are educating the generations that in the future will have the abilities to continue transforming the models for development and promoting better standards of life, bringing them up to those of the most competitive nations in the world.

“Estamos ahora formando a las generaciones que el día de mañana contarán con las habilidades necesarias para seguir transformando los modelos de desarrollo y promoviendo más y mejores niveles de vida, a la altura de las naciones más competitivas del mundo.”⁸¹

ITESM, the privately funded university, in its Mission declares the following about what that they are giving students:

“...an academic preparation that makes them internationally competitive in their area of knowledge.”

“...una preparación académica que los hace competitivos internacionalmente en

78 (Mission statement 1: Public university mission statement).

79 (Mission statement 2: Private university mission statement).

80 (Mission statement 1: Public university mission statement).

81 (Mission statement 1: Public university mission statement).

su área de conocimiento.”⁸²

4.4.3 Expected profile of students and graduates

The third theme in these documents is that of the expected profile of their graduates. This profile is expressed as a series of values, attitudes and abilities that the universities promote among their students and expect them to have as graduates. This idea of the expected profile is even extended sometimes to the staff in one of the institutions.

The UANL lists the following five expectations: to acquire a sense of life, to be consciously aware about the social situation around them, to prepare themselves as responsible professionals and responsible human beings. From its graduates, it expects them to be innovative and competitive at an international level and to look for their personal development and the progress of their country in a worldwide context. Additionally, UANL includes the expectations they have from staff, not only from students. In their expectations of a specific profile they want staff to be people committed to the economic, scientific, technological and cultural development of humanity.

This means that staff and students should commit themselves to the economic, scientific, technological and cultural development of humanity; they should be innovative and be competitive at an international level in order to achieve their personal development and progress for the country in a global context.

“Esto significa que el personal y los estudiantes deben comprometerse con el desarrollo económico, científico, tecnológico y cultural de la humanidad, innovar y ser competitivos internacionalmente para lograr su desarrollo personal y alcanzar el progreso del país en el contexto mundial.”⁸³

82 (Mission statement 2: Private university mission statement).

83 (Mission statement 1: Public university mission statement).

The last theme in these documents is the expected profile from graduates. Both universities agree that their graduates must be:

- Professionals with a high humanitarian profile and individuals committed to the economic, scientific and cultural development of their country.
- People who are competitive people at an international level.

Graduates should show:

- Responsibility, honesty, teamwork, leadership.
- Knowledge of languages and information technologies and ability to use of critical thinking skills.

In both cases, the universities organized these profiles around the abilities, values and attitudes that they expect students to develop either through the activities they promote as well as by the teaching and learning processes students go through in their years at university. One general observation after analyzing these documents was that the themes were very similar and that, in general, they echoed the way the academics talked about the role of the universities, and the responsibilities of teaching attitudes, values and abilities. The idea that the university is there to answer the society's needs reinforced the sort of 'static' position of the universities before the 'society.' This is a topic that kept appearing in their discourses. The similarities between what the documents say and what the academics reported struck me as interesting and made me think of the recycling of discourses given in these sources. It made me wonder whether the documents are reflecting the academics' opinions or the academics are reporting the 'official' messages put forward by the universities.

4.5 Bringing the three views together

The concluding part of this chapter gathers the views of academics, students and official documents comparing what they said and where I found more overlapping as well as distinctive themes in each type of source.

4.5.1 Overlapping themes among the three views

Among the similarities, the theme of values and attitudes ran through the three different sources, both as something to be learned or something to be taught. Other times, this same theme in the eyes of the academics, emerged as something to be promoted or enhanced through education. In the students' accounts this theme was number one in the list (with 66.1%) and they wrote about how higher education reinforced, and in many cases, taught them values and attitudes like responsibility, honesty, maturity, working in teams, independence and freedom.

Teachers equally talked about teaching abilities and values as part the new curriculum and learning paradigm. The type of profile they expected from graduates, for example, is spelt out as a list of attitudes, abilities and values that they want the students to develop. In one of the institutions, one of the academics said that they are moving towards a model more orientated to the teaching of values having been an institution which emphasised the teaching of abilities in their aim to produce qualified science graduates predominantly in the areas of engineering.

As an academic institution we have reoriented our paradigm from being an institution that taught certain skills for technical degrees in order to support this vision, but now it is teaching also an education based on attitudes and values...

“Como institución académica hemos ido reorientando el paradigma de ser una institución de enseñanza de ciertas habilidades, y de ciertas especializaciones

sean técnicas o en términos de licenciaturas para seguir aportando esta visión pero acompañarla con la educación sustentada en la actitudes y en los valores...’’⁸⁴

In the mission statements of institutions, values and attitudes took up the largest part of the document⁸⁵. According to my experience of working at that private institution, there was a strong emphasis on lecturers’ understanding what these values and attitudes were and to show through our courses’ description that they were part of our classes. Every course syllabus, for example, had to be outlined in those terms to make sure all courses were ‘in line’ with the mission of the institution.

The shift towards values and attitudes in the educational models of these institutions relates to what could be called the ‘humanistic turn’ in higher education. In the technologically orientated university (ITESM), they are bringing the ‘human’ side into their model after being blamed for producing professionals highly skilled in their area of knowledge but somehow socially detached and with a limited understanding of social issues. One of the academics emphasised this idea saying they want to form a more ‘integrated’ graduate who will have expertise in the area of knowledge, yet is sensitive to the social changes and needs their jobs may involve:

In the way we perceive what a person is and what a professional is, it is a person who is successful, capable and competitive in their professional field but they are mainly, persons.

...this approach takes us, I would say, to retake the role of humanities and place it as the central piece of our integration as an institution and in the formation of our students, as a vital part of the educational project.

“En la percepción de lo que es persona y profesionista, persona capaz, exitosa y

84 (Interview ITA: Private university, social science lecturer).

85 please refer to Appendices 3 and 4 to see the entire document.

competitiva en su ámbito profesional pero que sobre todo, sean personas.”

“...este enfoque nos lleva, yo diría a retomar el papel de las humanidades y colocarlo como un eje fundamental en nuestra integración como institución y en la formación de nuestro estudiantes, como parte de todo el proyecto educativo.”⁸⁶

In the public university, on the other hand, academics talked about the values that have always been part of their mission but that are now emphasised through the new changes in the curriculum. As we saw, one of them talked about the ‘rescuing’ mission of the university guiding students to better use of their time and teaching them a culture of pro-activity, while another academic talked about how this traditional profile of students’ attitudes and values had always been an ideal and that what they needed to emphasize now was not just to be critical, but to be proactive as well (see footnotes 53 and 60).

The concurrent appearance of the theme of values and attitudes and the humanistic turn in education in the different voices in this research seems to indicate that it has ‘permeated’ the students’ as well as the teachers’ discourse. This raises questions as to how this piece of discourse, in particular, is found in the three sources studied. What has motivated the interest in teaching values and attitudes and the type of impact it might have in the way students value higher education?

Another theme that was found in the three sources was students’ participation in society. An interesting finding in this area was that although the academics and the mission statements emphasized how important this should be in the students’ education, it did not amount to a high percentage in the students’ accounts with only 9.16%, scoring the lowest of all the themes. Among those who did write about how they could

⁸⁶ (Interview IU/A: Public university, social science lecturer).

participate in society there seemed to be a slightly higher interest in female students than in males, and the same applied to foreign versus local students.

The emphasis in this participation from students seems to be a part of the ideal profile of the graduates, yet it is not found in a great deal of the students' responses. Academics emphasized these themes as a 'should be' but when asked about how they saw students' participation, there was some contradiction in their answers. They talked about some activities that students get involved in but most of them were done as a requirement to graduate, for example, doing certain number of hours as community or social work. Other examples of participation included students' plans for the future, like studying a postgraduate degree or travelling abroad. In general, the interviewees reported a low level of participation when asked directly about this issue; nevertheless, when they talked about the expected profile of students, the theme was highly emphasized.

Actually, it is stated in the vision statement that the students should be excellent professionals; internationally competitive, they should be committed to the development of their community. This is very important because this was one of the areas where the TEC graduate has an opportunity, since in the past they were not seen as committed to the development of their community.

“De hecho, en la visión está que el alumno debe ser excelente profesional, debe ser competitivo internacionalmente, debe ser una persona comprometida con el desarrollo de sus comunidades. Eso es sumamente importante porque es una de las áreas y oportunidades que tiene el egresado de este instituto en relaciones pasadas, que no se les percibía comprometidos al desarrollo de la comunidad.”⁸⁷

The academics as well as the universities' brochures encouraged students to be participative in the economic, political and social development of their community and

⁸⁷ (Interview ITB: Private university, science lecturer)

their country; however, the students' low response seems to indicate this part of the mission statement is still stronger in the ideal profile rather than in the real students' interests.

In the area of students' complaints and negative experiences during university, I found that the academics also talked about some of these complaints when asked how they perceived the students. What was interesting was the fact that the negative feelings students reported about their interaction with the lecturers, the excessive workload and mostly the stress and tension experienced during university life did not seem to be a concern or a theme in the academics' interviews. They mentioned that students complained about homework as usual, but that it was expected when changes in the curriculum were introduced and almost saw it as a natural reaction from students. This apparent lack of unawareness from the academics as to the stress and tensions experienced by students may confirm that the distant relationship and 'barrier' reported by students in some of their answers.

4.5.2 Distinctive themes

This section presents the themes that were found in only one or two of the sources, but not in the three of them at the same time. Amongst the themes that were exclusive or distinctive in the students' accounts was education as a family project. While this is a theme where students write a lot about personal gains, feelings of pride and a means to social mobility for them and their families, neither the academics nor the institutional literature seem to have any of this in their discourse. Here again it is the personal interest of the students which does not seem to find correspondence in the 'mind' of the academics and the institutions. Something similar happened with the theme of social distinction, with a high percentage in students' responses (46.70%) and no mention of it in the rest of the sources.

One of the themes that was emphasized by the academics and became an important issue when talking about the graduates' profiles in terms of values and attitudes was 'culture.' The word was also a popular choice in the students' discourse; however, the way both groups used it was different. In the interviews with academics, the word 'culture' was used to denote a type of environment, atmosphere, and in a particular case, a way for people to conduct themselves, a set of rules and principles of behaviour for staff and students.

The Tec Culture...let's say, it is a series of attitudes, principles and norms that have guided the life of our Institution.

*"Cultura Tec...digamos que estos son una serie de actitudes y de principios y normas que han regido la vida del instituto."*⁸⁸

...then what we need to generate is a culture of reading, the culture of discipline to be able to master knowledge and abilities.

*"... entonces lo que hay que generar es la cultura de la lectura, la cultura de la disciplina para acercarnos nosotros al conocimiento, las habilidades."*⁸⁹

For students, the word culture was related to being more knowledgeable and having a higher social status, in general.

Culture⁹⁰: Through the university education one gets to be a person with more 'culture' and more knowledge. A person who is invaluable for their country and who can also compete with other countries.

⁸⁸ (Interview ITA: Private university, social science lecturer).

⁸⁹ (Interview IUB: Public university, science lecturer).

⁹⁰ In this case 'culture' is used as a synonym for habit, or set of habits.

“Cultura: A través de la educación universitaria se llega a ser una persona de más cultura y más conocimientos. Una persona valiosa para su país de origen pero suficientemente preparada para enfrentarse también a otros países.”⁹¹

From the senior academics’ point of view, the term ‘culture’ takes the notion of something that exists in the institution and is to be promoted among those who work and study there. It is something to be cultivated in students as the discipline to read and to work in teams, to be punctual and responsible. In most cases it equates to a set of values and attitudes. For students, it is the knowledge they get in the institution and a resource that makes them more valuable as professionals. In the academics’ discourse, there was also the idea of ‘teaching’ the students a more productively oriented culture saying that, as Mexicans, they do not have the ability to work in teams, for example.

“When in Mexico there is no culture of working in teams, it is very little that can be expected. It is the duty of the university is to make a strategy of working in teams.”

“cuando en México no existe esa cultura de ser capaces de trabajar en equipo es muy poco lo que se puede esperar. Ese es el papel de que sea estrategia de la universidad para ser trabajo en equipo.”⁹²

There is an idea that what the students bring from outside (values, skills, attitudes, knowledge) into the institutions needs to be ‘channelled’ or improved through the institutional order. This emphasized again the role of ‘rescue’ from the universities and the tendency to see the university and the society as disassociated elements, each with a different ‘culture’ and apparently formed by different people.

⁹¹ (Document TAFL028: Local, social science, private university, female student).

⁹² (Interview ITB: Private university, science lecturer).

4.6 Conclusion

After presenting the findings from the analysis of the three sources of data, I would like to underline some general ideas to take for further discussion in the following chapter. There is a tendency in the words of the students and the academics as well as through the official documents of the universities to emphasize attitudes and values through university education. Students gave a high score to the learning and reinforcing of attitudes and values in the analysis and their answers indicated that they see the university as a place and environment which promotes and reinforces these values. They also mentioned that these values may have a strong influence on their future and may help them become successful professionals.

In the opinion of one of the senior academics, the university has a big responsibility in preparing students for being successful professionals with the abilities and values needed to interact and compete in the new type of society we live in. In the words of one of the academics, this responsibility meant investing in the formation of highly skilled human resources or human capital, arguing that the economic and social changes experienced in our days called for the development of human capital since the future economy will be one based on knowledge.

The technological and social changes we are experiencing and of which we are part, are forcing us to make an important investment in the formation of human resources, what is called human capital and what was called before industrial or economic capital. Now we talk about human capital because the economy of the future will be centred on knowledge.

“El cambio tecnológico y el cambio social que estamos presenciando y del cual somos parte también, obliga a hacer una inversión importante en la formación de los recursos humanos, lo que se llama capital humano, lo que antes se llamaba capital industrial o capital económico, ahora se habla de capital humano porque

la economía del futuro va a ser una economía centrada en el conocimiento.”⁹³

Other ideas were about how the university meets this need of the society for good professionals and went from seeing a ‘rescuing mission’ through education and channelling of students’ potential to instilling in students and staff a type of institutional culture based on certain principles and norms. The tone in their answers talks of a mission to transform students into successful professionals and in doing this, the teaching of certain values and attitudes plays an important role. Talking about the role of the universities, there does not seem to be any doubt about what values are important to teach or if it is as necessary to do it altogether, let alone whether universities should be the ones in charge of doing it. There seems to be an almost total faith in that mission and in the way it is being carried out. The mission statements of the universities follow the same tone and, as pointed out previously in the chapter, the amalgamation of discourses is such that when doing the analysis of these documents, there were no new themes found because it all merged into what the academics had talked about.

By looking at the analytical themes in the students’ accounts, the ones on social distinction and knowledge as an asset were particularly closely related. By stating that having the knowledge that a university degree certified was a good investment or asset, students ratified their understanding that in society a degree of that kind paid off and that this payment would be translated into social recognition. In many cases students referred to the utilitarian purpose of their education by looking at it as a ‘tool’ or as a ‘step’, and for some, as preparation for a guaranteed better future. The idea that after graduating they will have a guaranteed job and better social and economic position seems to give students higher hopes on their degree thus making worth the efforts and negative feelings they may experience through their years in university.

⁹³ (Interview ITA: Private university, social science lecturer).

It is interesting to see that face to face with reality this sometimes may look like a 'dream' when high rates of unemployment in the job market hit university graduates more than other sectors. This is one of the instances where the theme of university education as social distinction comes into play. For many students, holding the degree proves more than being able to get a job; it means they can be now socially recognised as somebody 'different' with more knowledge and education. In this sense, being 'different' translates to being 'superior.' The respect they expect from others as well as the distinction they get for being part of the intellectual elite may compensate, at times, for not having a job or being sub-employed. In some of the accounts, students expressed a great sense of pride for being at the university, especially if they were the first university graduate in the family or when they felt they were setting an example for their children or siblings.

As the access to education, and specifically to higher education, continues to be limited in developing, as well as in developed economies, the status of university education grows higher. In addition to this is the low value other academic certifications are given in the job market, for example the ones issued by technological institutes and teacher training centres. All the above reinforces the idea that, in fact, university graduates belong to an elite and should be socially rewarded and as it works out that way, students have the right to feel entitled to this distinction. It is what Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) would identify as the power of education to 'reproduce a culture' or pattern inside the same field of education.

The connection between a university education and the possibility of social mobility seems to be clear for students every time they equated education with a better job and better salary. Without considering the rates of unemployment among university graduates, it would be simple; however, changes in the job market make it a more complicated matter. This university degree -job connection could be a concern for universities and curriculum planners because graduating students who will not have a good job in the future may seem contrary to their promise of preparing successful professionals. These concerns were addressed by the academics in the interviews as

they talked of the limited capacity of the public universities to accept students and the stress they were under by the educational authorities asking them to accept more than they could cope with. Going back to the students' opinions, they do not seem to take into account this issue and their dreams of a better future and social mobility keep resting on higher education in spite of the reality of the future job market.

The last theme to point out in this analysis is about the expectations the institutions have from students as is expressed through the academics' discourse and the mission statements and the type of individuals they are aiming to 'produce'. Pervasive in the documents and part of the academics' interviews as well is the idea that the individuals they want to graduate shall have this specified profile where abilities, values and attitudes are a central part. There is an emphasis on creating individuals with a competitive attitude as well as a strong sense of solidarity and commitment to their community and their country. The 'competitiveness' implies mastering more than one foreign language and having a good understanding and use of technology. Assigning numerous projects in teams is aiming at making students collaborative, tolerant and good leaders while self-study would motivate autonomy. This competitive – collaborative way of working could generate possible tension among students, especially when they are learning to work in teams as they are also competing for the best grades. Nonetheless, this situation would probably be experienced as well outside the university when they compete for a job, so in that sense this would prepare them for the real world.

In the emphasis of the universities for making students competitive, it is not clear whether it is aimed at world class competitiveness or competitiveness among themselves. What they emphasise is that the students would be competitive (world class level) in their area of knowledge. If the competition is in order to help the country to enter the world market better equipped it stands in contradiction with the little interest students showed to get involved in helping their communities. If the emphasis is to get students to learn to work in teams and towards a group goal, then getting the best grades in the classroom may become an issue. This ambivalent feeling is also sensed when students on one hand acknowledged that what they were learning at the university was

an asset, and yet, they complained about how excessive work and duties were sometimes annulling their social lives.

The fact that universities have taken the mission to ‘produce successful professionals’ and developed strategies to accomplish it, raises the question of what perception they have of students, what kind of response they expect from them, whether they see them as co-participants or recipients of this mission. As the academics reported, ‘students always complain’ about the changes they were introducing, they need to be guided and rescued, if necessary, to make them successful professionals. It seems to me that the perception they have of students tends to be a passive one and their mission is to transform them. Although the mission may sound commendable, it seems to leave students in a vulnerable position and depicts them as passive elements in the process. There is little talk of who the students are before they come to university and what reactions they may have towards this mission. In the words of students I found a lot of repetition of the mission statement phrases, the discourse of being competitive, successful, adaptable, and problem-solvers. They all come from and go to the same source, the official discourse of being educated to be rewarded. So, what type of identity is being generated in the universities? Is it an identity that participates and gets involved? Is it an identity geared towards thinking and expressing their opinions? Is it just a degree-holding identity in a society where jobs are limited for graduates?

The instrumental turn that university education seems to have taken poses interesting questions to educators, educational authorities and other sectors of society as the value of a degree is seen in terms of economic benefits and there is a failure to acknowledge how much value it may have in shaping the individuals’ identity and the implications of this in social interaction. The hopes that students have for their degree also invites reflection on how the social value and recognition of a title seems to erase the reality of the job market as students and their families keep investing in education. Finally, it is also important to think about how the universities are responding to their role of educating and forming the citizens of the present and future and how everyone from students to academics and authorities in such organisations is contributing to it. There is

a need to reflect and see university education as part of the society as a whole and analyze its impact in this inclusive context to be able to take responsibility as equal participants in the process of education. A discussion of these issues follows in the next chapter.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS: HIGHER EDUCATION'S IDEOLOGY, IDENTITY AND FORMS OF CAPITAL

Introduction

At the beginning of my research I was interested in seeing what meanings university students related to higher education and how those concepts could be influential in the way they constructed their identity. My intention was to see how students understood higher education, what ideas they linked to it and how that could influence the way in which they identified themselves as 'educated people'. I was also interested in seeing what other ideologies of higher education were presented through official documents of the institutions and through the voice of the academics, and how students were reacting to them, whether they were taking them into account or not in their own perception of higher education. An additional interest was finding out whether students saw education as an important tool to help them participate in society as agents of change.

The reason to embark on this study was based on my belief that the way students construct their identity through their experiences in the university might have implications for the way they interact in different situations. Among these implications could be the approaches they follow in order to get a job; how they think about working in teams and being competitive in and outside university life; how they react when evaluating a system or a project; and what type of loyalties they would develop towards a place or an institution depending on their experiences with these issues at the university. Another important implication could be the type of values and attitudes they would cultivate as part of their professional identity, their identity as citizens, parents, employers, lawyers, politicians or educators. Although my study did not explore the life of students as graduates, what I gathered from their answers does contain the students' projections of what they want to do in their future as university graduates, projections that seem to be influenced by how they see higher education in their lives now as university students. The scope of my original research questions and interests has been

enriched throughout the process of the research itself, from revisiting the literature to doing the analysis of the data and the presentation of findings. Going through these different stages has thrown light upon some issues that border and surround students' identity such as gender and academics' identity. In my opinion, the discovery of these issues that were not originally conceived as part of the research adds relevance to the study.

Through this study it has been possible to explore the different meanings students attach to HE as part of their life project as well as the ways they identify themselves as individuals based on this education. Another finding has been how students understand and value higher education and how they 'accommodate' this understanding and evaluation to their expectations of a university degree. By doing that, they are concerned with validating their future identity as university graduates. Their aspirations for a better future, their ideas on values as well as their attitudes towards the way the educational system works seem to be mediated by their own interpretation of the goals and purposes of higher education. This mediation reflects the degree of agency exercised by the students in constructing their identity as they negotiate public with private discourse, collective and individual goals, their present and future identities for "discourse figures in ways of being, in the constitution of identities" (Fairclough 2003:206).

The results of this study have enabled me to find different sources for the students' identity in the interplay between the ideology of HE and the different notions of capital revealed in their discourse. First, the ideology revealed through the HEIs' mission statements carries a message that says why HE is important, how it should be done and for what purpose. Then, similar lines are found in the discourse of the academics showing how this ideology has been internalised at the level of staff in the institution. Third, there is a way in which students seem to be (re)interpreting this ideology as they decide which part of it relates more to their personal interests and which does not. In this reinterpretation, students look at the benefits they can have by following a

university education and make these benefits part of their personal ‘capital’, incorporating that into their identity. In general, HE is viewed partly as something they can ‘exchange’ and ‘invest into’ at some point as graduates. This capital includes cultural, social and moral ‘gains’ that students have reported as acquired or reinforced during their time in the university. Being educated under the same ideology, the type of exchanges and capitals students would gain could be expected to be similar; however, the results in my study suggest that they may vary depending on the institutions the students attended. That is, the way the ideology of HE is operationalised at the level of institution through practices, policies and ways of doing things may create a different ‘habitus’, where students would develop different expectations and practices, perceive more or fewer ‘gains’ and construct their identities according to these differences. It is therefore important to pay attention to the ways in which the ideology of HE is reflected at different levels (mission statements, academics’ points of view and students’ opinions) as well as to how it is operationalised in the academic institutions creating different ‘environments’ (habitus) which students draw from as they construct a definition of who they are.

5.1 Higher education’s ideology and habitus

The purpose of this section is to introduce the concepts of HE presented to the students (directly and indirectly) and how these are operationalised in the organisation of the universities. The main sources this context analysis draws from are the discourses used by the senior academics and the messages in the mission statements of the universities.

5.1.1 HE ideology

The mission statements of the universities studied as well as the academics’ discourse in their interviews represent channels through which the ideology of HE could be revealed (Foucault 1989; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Menon, 2002). These two sources contain the official concepts of HE that students are presented with and which declare, in general terms, what needs to be taught and for what purpose. They also contain what is

expected from the students as university graduates as well as from the staff working in those institutions. What can be gathered from these messages is that HE is seen to play an important role in society by preparing or equipping students with the necessary tools (knowledge, values and attitudes) for an optimal functioning in the society. The opinions from most of the academics confirm this mission of the universities and validate their role as part of the education process. The idea that HE is a 'necessary' tool for society to advance and the way in which it is operating in these institutions hardly appears to be questioned. There were no instances in the mission statements inviting a reflexive or questioning attitude about it. In the case of the discourse used by the senior academics, for example, only one out of the four expressed concerns about the nature of the statement. He elaborated on the fact that probably this mission of the universities was outdated given the fact that they could not be constituted any more as centres of knowledge or as the answer to what students needed in terms of academic skills to successfully integrate into post-university life.

The fact that this mission of the universities goes almost unquestioned poses interesting questions as to how much the academics and the students are reflecting on what it is being presented as 'valid' or 'necessary.' In the case of the academics, it is also a question of what beliefs and assumptions they have about HE because they would have also participated in the creation of these statements and now they are repeating them. This issue of limited 'questioning' also prompts the question of which of these ideas in the official discourse are part of the students' points of view, and the question of how much are they taking from them and making them part of their own discourse. According to my study, some of the students' responses revealed a high degree of similarity. Students seemed to be using official discourses in order to define who they were, what they are looking for and what they are getting from the university. However, there were some areas where the official and the students' discourse clearly differed. This was mainly due to the interpretations students were making of some of the concepts managed in the official discourse. Although these differences can be found at the level of students' opinions, universities through their mission statements continue to

present a somewhat consolidated message of their function in society and in the lives of those involved in HE.

The ideology of higher education presented by the universities in my study stresses in the students' profile notions of intellectual development combined with a committed attitude to use HE to help the development of the country. ITESM, for example, talks about development of the community; UANL broadens its aim to include the development of 'humanity'. An important part of this mission is to make individuals innovative and competitive in an area of knowledge and at an international level, so they can improve the country's profile in the world context. The nature of this commitment replicates the global tendencies in models of higher education (Scott, 1998). Most universities around the world follow a model where they are expected to produce what other sectors of the society need for their development, be it technological, political or economic, and Mexico is no exception (Ibarra, 2002). This tendency to follow a similar model of HE around the world, and that has been operating in Mexico since the early 1980's, has often been criticised as an intent for homogenization, and in a more critical view, for an 'Americanization' of the higher education system (Rodriguez, R., 1999). One of the ideas in this model emphasises the role of the university in providing the 'society' with the knowledge it needs for its development. In this 'provider' and 'supplier' metaphor, knowledge has been 'commodified' by transforming it to an exchangeable good. In the context of this discourse, the identity of the universities is also reconstructed giving them a strategic position: "a variety of the concomitant discursive practices have been taken on board too, which, in turn, shapes the structure, strategies, and decision-making processes of higher education institutions as well as the habitus of those involved" (Mautner, 2003).

Through their mission statements, universities assert their role in society and legitimise their right to decide what the students need to learn and what for. Academic credentials continue to be the seal of progress and of social advancement in modern societies and the added value of an academic degree in a time where knowledge acts as if it had a

price confirms HEIs' prominent position. This privileged position of universities is backed up by a modern, hungry-for-titles society and "it is at this point that the work of knowledge- producers and configurers becomes central to the life of all citizens...in modern society" (Muller and Subotzky 2001: 165-6). I would argue that this might make them less susceptible to questioning, especially for academics and students involved in their operation, as I discuss in the next paragraphs in the light of the results of my study. As we saw in chapter 4 (section 4.5) the similarities between the mission statements and the academics' interviews about the role of higher education give evidence of a coherent discourse among the 'official voices' of the system of education. My study suggests that the senior academics' opinions may be highly influenced by the institution they work in as well as issues related to lack of reflexivity and conformist positions in the system which can in turn be related, as it emerged, to academic identity, an area new to my study. The close relationship between mission statements and academics' points of view, as well as the apparent lack of criticism, could be a result of the academics' interest in congruence, to reiteration of common goals and, in the end, validation of their messages. This was particularly true for the private university involved in the present study where the similarities between messages coincided even at the level of wording.

In defence of such similarity, one could say that as part of the ideology embraced by an institution, a relatively high degree of similarity between these messages could be expected. It could be evidence of a positive understanding and integration among the members of such institution; the same, however, could also be identified as a low level of criticism and as a disadvantage. It could be that academics and students are failing to reflect and evaluate their own participation in the institution, or at least to voice their opinions on this. In the public university, that sense of coherence between mission statements and the academics' points of view was not as evident as in the private one. The academics' responses carried an air of suspicion on whether the university could be able to fulfil the promises made in the statements. Although the level of criticism was low, academics from the public university showed a more questioning attitude than those from the private one.

One of the possible reasons for this difference in critiques could be the level of reflexivity academics apply when they compare the reality they experience in their institutions against what is officially said by the mission statements. In the case of the public university, the doubts and questions would come from the academics' experience working for an institution with limited resources and infrastructure. This is explicitly mentioned by one of the academics regarding policies of widening access which from his point of view exceed their capacity to attend to students, creating an atmosphere of tension and in the end an inability to do what is officially promised. I believe their opinions come as well from a more realistic perspective on what the universities can and cannot do given the rates of employability faced by their graduates. It is estimated that 31.6 percent of public university graduates in Mexico can visualise a job opportunity in the area of their studies while the percentage for graduates from a private university rises to 53.9 percent (Reyes, 2001).

For the senior academics from the private university, the reality inside their institution is different. Relying on students' fees as their main source of funding, an increase in enrolment is not a problem, but a blessing. The fact that public universities do not have the infrastructure to accept all aspiring students creates a market for private institutions if students can afford higher fees. In this context, the law of supply and demand works at its best and the number of private institutions of HE keeps growing in Mexico at the rate of 2 new HEIs per month, according to statistics from the Ministry of Education (El Norte, 2003). Thinking back on the issue of lack of critiques and questioning found in the academics from the private university, one can see that the reality that they live in their institutions with more resources and infrastructure plus the high employability of their graduates would allow them to have more positive expectations and less complaints about the institution. It could also make them less doubtful of their institution's ability to fulfil what it promises in its mission. I would argue that the optimistic scenario that academics have in private institutions may have a strong influence on their level of criticism and questioning towards such institutions. It was surprising to find, for example, that the academics interviewed from the private university hardly expressed any doubt about the educational practices introduced by the

academic reform at TEC (REDISEÑO)⁹⁴. Their answers reflect a high degree of confidence in their beliefs that they are giving the best education and providing what the ‘society’ needs. From an ideological point of view this is almost the perfect scenario for keeping the status quo: no complaints, no criticism, and most likely, no change. It seems as if TEC’s ideology and practices with its high reputation as a producer of competitive labour force does not need to be questioned either by insiders, nor by outsiders. UANL’s, on the other hand, with a lower profile pointed out by its own members and by outside opinion (poor recognition of its graduates) is more likely to be scrutinised. This situation reflects part of the criteria used to rate public against private institutions, not only in the education sector but also in other public services.

Another possible reason for the lower level of critique in the academics’ discourse from the private university could be the sense of pride in being part of an institution and the fact that the satisfaction they find in working for such an institution might partially blind their critical vision as academics. In terms of identity construction, this could be linked to a ‘validation of the self’ as a result of the interviewer’s presence and the desire of the academics to project and assert for themselves a specific academic or institutional identity. The ‘parroted’ of the institution’s official messages helped them to construct their identity in front of me as academics that were working for the right educational cause and in the right institution. This image of ‘rightfulness’ was prevalent in most of their speech. From this point of view, it would have been incongruent to criticise a system that they identified with since it backed up and validated a ‘right academic identity.’ As I reflect on my experience when I used to work for that private institution, I myself went through this phase of feeling I was in the right party, fighting for the right cause. As previously mentioned (chapter 4, section 4.3.3), there is a strong emphasis from the administration in promoting what they call the “TEC Culture” among staff and students. As was shown in the interviews, there is also a sense of pride in the academics knowing about the mission statements and promoting the values the institute lives by.

⁹⁴ New teaching-learning design called “rediseño” which integrates in an emphatic way the use of computers and other educational technologies into the teaching learning process (Burkle & Sayed, 2002)

By insisting that staff and students follow the values of the institution as their culture, TEC may be aiming to create among its members a feeling of belonging. This supports my argument that being proud of belonging to an institution would make it difficult to be able to take a stand, to see it from outside and criticise it.

In Foucault's terms, this is a good example of indoctrination and 'discipline' of the subject inside an institution which uses different resources and channels to achieve this purpose: "Discourses are about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationships; they constitute both subjectivity and power relations" (Ball 1990: 2). TEC has established a teaching skills development program called DHP (Desarrollo de Habilidades Docentes / Teaching Skills Development) that all academics have to take as part of the prerequisites to work in the new academic reform (called "Redesign Programme- 'Programa de Rediseño' in Spanish). The programme has different levels of qualification that are then translated into promotions and salary rises for academics. The way this program gratifies academics resembles what Bourdieu describes as the 'meritocratic' value of qualifications and accumulations of credentials that academia is involved in "... the inheritor of bourgeois privileges must today appeal to the academic certification which attests at once his gifts and his merits" (Bourdieu 1990: 202). Following Foucault's ideas of how ideology reflects on discourse, the similarities and differences in the discourse of the academics, the mission statements and students show the dynamics of the process by which ideology seems to operate at the level of institutions and of individuals. It also shows the degree of agency in the individuals to interact with these ideological messages integrating them into their discourse as they negotiate their roles and define who they are in the education process.

To sum up, in the ideology of HEIs there seems to be a strong emphasis on teaching students the abilities, values and attitudes that would make them successful professionals. These attitudes and values follow a paradigm of teaching and learning significantly driven by labour-market forces prevalent in our days. This model is often

criticised in theory as unilateral and lenient to economic interests rather than to educational goals:

While some consider this type of education 'progressive', others, see it as a collapse of the true purposes of education. It seems that the purpose of having 'education for individual awareness, fulfilment and learning how to work for the common good'... has become a nostalgic claim. (Kenway 1990: 193)

According to what has been reported in this study, this model keeps operating in practice in Mexico with little questioning. The universities' mission statements and the weak instances of criticism expressed by the academics and the students seem to strongly support its continuation.

5.1.2 HE habitus

Departing from Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus (chapter 2 section 2.1.1.3) other notions which argue for a more dynamic version of it have developed. These notions emphasise that 'habitus' does not have to be durable but can be reconstructed (Smith, 2003) and that it can be 'fluid' and interactive and undergo changes depending on the context it develops (Brooks, 2003). The emergence of these versions of habitus addresses the long sociological debate about agency and structure as well as the interest for these new positions to validate the role of agency in the subjects. Reay et al (2001) developed the concept of institutional habitus as "a complex internalised core from which everyday experiences emanate. It is the source of day to day practices" (2001: 2). Following this definition, a university habitus would be the source of students' practices generated from what happens inside the institution and, which along with other influences like family and friends, make the students' habitat and place for action (in Bourdieu's notion of 'field'). In the same study, Reay et al (2001: 13) state that there are "organisational practices, attitudes and assumptions which make up institutional habitus" and it is on this conception of habitus that my argument for the construction of different identities due to institutional difference stands.

Bourdieu's idea that differences in 'habitus', specifically in the generation of cultural capital, may produce disadvantageous positions for some subjects in the educational system proves a valid tool to analyse the differences in the 'habitus' of the institutions I studied. However, what I find problematic is the sense of determinacy implied in his concepts which seem to allow little space for personal agency and action outside the social structures. As I found through my study, students find room for agency within the institutional structure and make use of this space to modify, accommodate and negotiate their position.

Addressing the question of how differently TEC and UANL students construct their identity, the core of my findings suggests that this difference is linked to the type of 'environment' or 'habitus' prevailing in these institutions. This notion of habitus (Reay et al, 2001; Thomas, 2000) includes tangible as well as non-tangible resources which in combination seem to provide some students with more options than others, thus influencing the way in which they define themselves in the present and project their identity for the future. Due to the difference in choices or opportunities available to students in each institution, their identities seem to be shaped in different ways. However, to say that the habitus created by the institution is solely responsible for this difference would fail to acknowledge the fact that the individual characteristics of the students also have an impact on the type of habitus developed in the institutions. To do this would be to take a traditional view of identity construction where the passive position of the subject allows for a strong domination of the structure.

The selective attitude students show when they confirm, ignore or modify what the official messages say proves that they do take part in the construction and development of this habitus and that it is possible to visualise this habitus as 'dynamic and changeable'. This possibility of action and choice (agency) allows them certain freedom to manipulate the ideological messages (structure) that they are presented with by the universities' administration. In this way, identity emerges from the interplay between the different 'moments' of agency and the structure that students live in the university.

The nature of these interactions seems to be affected by both the profile of the students and that of the institutions.

Analysing the attitudes of the academics in terms of identity construction, Reay et al 's concept of 'institutional habitus' would be useful to interpret the influences of the institution's environment, atmosphere, or 'habitat' on the identity of the individuals: "any conception of institutional habitus would similarly, constitute a complex amalgam of agency and structure and could be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation" (2001:1). Both the academics and the TEC administration collaborate to give the 'TEC academic identity' an individually and socially validated existence. This interplay between institution and individuals and how they combine their 'interests' was a prevalent theme throughout this study. As previously mentioned, although academics' identity construction was not part of my original research, it emerged as other evidence of what I shall later discuss under 'institutionalised identity'. This last concept underlines the idea of how influential the institutional habitus of the university can be on the academics' opinions of their own educational system since "whatever the habitus to be inculcated, conformist or innovatory, conservative or revolutionary, and whether in the religious, artistic or scientific fields, all work schooling generates a discourse tending to make explicit and systematize the principles of that habitus" (Bourdieu 1990: 59). It becomes a kind of social game through which the management of the institution and the academics validate each other's identity. As a result of this interchange of messages between ideologies supported by institutions and institutions supported by ideologies, the individuals involved, students, academics, and authorities, seem to develop a certain idea of how things are done and direct their practices according to (or sometimes against) this understanding.

Following the ideas of Bourdieu (1990) and Reay et al (2001), this understanding of practices would become the institutional habitus. In this context, habitus becomes an arena where ideologies and practises of HE interact bringing definitions to concepts as

well as to individuals, validating actions and policies; creating an interactive field where the individuals' interests meet, change or renew. This is the kind of habitus that HE institutions provide for students and academics to interact within defining who they are, their interests and their identities. In the words of Jenny Williams (co-author of Anderson & Williams, 2001) in a conversation with Profr. Lynn Davies), habitus is like 'an envelope' in which various forms of capitals intersect and collide. As argued through this study, the way these different types of capitals give origin to different types of identities and the way they intersect and at times collide in the university habitus is evidence of the dynamism involved in their construction. Although they originate and evolve from similar settings (university sites) and apparently operate under the same ideology of HE, the way in which this ideology becomes operational in the different institutions may differ thus creating different 'arenas' for students and academics to build their identities. It is to the identities developed in these different institutional settings that the next section turns.

5.2 HE identity: institutions and forms of capital

In order to discuss how university students construct their identity, I have introduced the concept of 'HE identity.' It is the type of identity that students construct from the meanings they give to HE and the different experiences during their time in university. This type of identity is what I defined in chapter 2 as 'educational identity', a term borrowed from Antikainen (1996). What students experience inside the institution (i.e. attending lectures, joining students' associations, working in teams) combined with other non-scholarly activities (i.e. taking a part time job, attending to family responsibilities, having a social life) conforms what they relate to as their 'time in university.' This is, as identified by my study, a significant source of identity construction. Students use their university education to identify themselves as people with an educational project in their lives and whose future depends to a great extent on these studies. In this way, university education is not only giving them a reference point to define who they are in the present but also what they want to be or will be in the

future. In this student-university interaction, students seem to interpret from the institutional discourse whatever validates the type of identity they want to portray to themselves and to others. As a result of these interpretations different types of identities can be recognized. Some identities would show more links to the type of university students attend, their gender and discipline they study. Other types of identity would relate more to what students get in exchange for doing a university degree regardless of the institution and that could be labelled as an investment or form of capital. The following section focuses on identity and institutional differences while the second part elaborates on the topic of identity and the notions of university education as a type of exchange and capital.

5.3 Different institutions, different identities

Studies about the influence of HE on students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991 ; Chickering, 1993 ; Astin, 1993; Thomas 2000) have incorporated variants such as students' backgrounds, ethnic diversity and enrolment as full timers and part timers, in order to explore themes like integration in students' groups, retention, academic achievement and students' development among others. Their findings suggest that their attendance at HEIs affected some areas of students' lives and experiences more than others. In my study, I found that this influence is affected by the type of university students attend (private or public university). This difference is relevant because of the implications it has for an individual as well as at a social level. On the individual level, depending on what university they attend, students would develop a specific way of defining who they are, what education means for them and what expectations they have. Their discourse is affected by the institutional practices (habitus) and in turn, it affects this same habitus since "educational sites are subject to discourse but are also centrally involved in the propagation and selective dissemination of discourses, the 'social appropriation' of discourses" (Ball 1990: 3). Similarly, on the social level, people from outside the university i.e. employers, families, friends, develop different expectations from these students depending on the type of HEI they come from. The discourse of the

'Right Education' creates a dichotomy between state and private institutions and between all the different actors in both systems. It affects the social status of those related to them: families, teachers, staff and, obviously, students. It gives the subjects a category, first or second (Kenway, 1990).

In this respect, Foucault's theory (1989; cited also in Marshall 1990; Ball, 1990) provides an insight into how private and state educational institutions and their discourses are used to shape individuals. Because in his theory knowledge is considered a product of power relations that intervene not only in its production but in its dissemination and value, the degree of credibility (and valorisation) of this knowledge depends on the context where it is produced. If this is applied to the area of higher education and the choice for state-funded versus private universities, it is evident that in Mexico, the discourse operating nowadays privileges the knowledge associated with private universities. This, in turn, discredits the one received in public universities creating a rather unbalanced situation for public universities. The implications this has for students and the society as a whole go beyond a simple analysis. For students, for example, the fact that they belong to either a private or a state university may socially translate as an advantage or disadvantage, accordingly. The type of discourse generated in and outside the universities about what type of institutions they are affects the way the students feel inside the system. As this discourse gains credibility (private universities are better), it becomes common sense and could go unchallenged through different systems of society benefiting those advocating such discourse. What are some of the differences in the identities of students from both universities found in the discourses analysed in this study? Going back to the initial aims of my research, findings whether or not these differences may appear through my sample, it is important to mention that the differences mentioned here refer to general tendencies in the recurrent themes pointed out by the different sub-groups I made of the sample through attributes such as gender, discipline, type of institution, and localization. More in-depth study should be required to make more general claims in this respect. Nonetheless, I decided to include these differences here in order to reflect the heterogeneity of the sample studied as well as of the meanings students related to education in the groups

above mentioned. Therefore, when considering the claims made about these differences attention should be given to the circumstances particular to this study.

5.3.1 Different socialising patterns

One of the differences found between the students from the public and private university and that seems to have an effect in their identity is their socialising practices. Studies about the nature and composition of the university student population in Mexico (ANUIES, 2002; de Garay, 2002; Casillas et al, 2001; Rodriguez, R., 1999b) have reported that the type of students who attend the public and the private university differ. One of the aspects researchers paid attention to was the amount of time students spend in the university doing extra work, getting involved in university-run activities or simply socialising after their classes. Students from private universities, usually enrolled as fulltime students, had more time for these types of extra activities. Students from the public universities, on the other hand, would spend less time because they had other social commitments like a part-time or full time job and in some cases additional family responsibilities. The profile of the students in my research and the findings about which students get more involved in university activities coincide with the studies mentioned above. Through the students' writings however, I was able to take a closer look at how students in each institution talked about how much time they spent in the university and how that affected them (see table 4.1 students' negative views and criticisms / 20.05%). Students from the UANL's complaints are associated with not having enough time to do their homework or extra activities outside their lectures, especially those who were in part-time and full time jobs. Their answers are closely related to academic concerns. Students from TEC equally complain about excessive work outside class, but especially teamwork activities which besides causing them stress, are said to be 'damaging their social life'.

These specific differences in students' profiles appear to have an impact on the type of experiences they have in the universities and, therefore, on their perception of the

education they are receiving. In contrast to the studies made at a national level predominantly of a quantitative nature, my study conducted in two universities a private and a public one, reflects in more detailed ways the different perception of HE students have in both systems. The institutional differences I found are not only related to socialising practices, others focus on how students perceive their possibilities in the future, the confidence they have in success and what a university degree means in terms of choices or opportunities for personal and professional development. The fact that HE in Mexico presents this particular divide between public and private universities opens room for my study to provide general views as to how certain educational sites could create similar effects in the construction of the identities of their students.

5.3.2 Different curriculum practices

In terms of institutional organisational practices (*habitus*), the curriculum and its delivery seems to constitute a difference between the HEIs in this study. TEC aims to offer students a less traditional curriculum than UANL. In the mid 1990s both institutions started an academic reform issuing new mission and vision statements as well as the strategies to carry out these missions. At TEC, in order to follow this model, students receive training in IT skills and general IT literacy. They are expected to access most of their courses on line so it is necessary to have access to a personal computer, preferably a laptop or to use the computer labs at the university. There are more than 1000 internet point connections around the campus so students can access their courses almost anywhere they are: classroom, cafeterias, gym, gardens and residence halls. The situation at UANL in terms of curriculum redesign followed a similar fashion. They also reformed their curriculum and implemented changes in its delivery including more use of technology. However, the integration of the use of computers into the teaching-learning process was done at a lower scale than at TEC. At UANL, students can also enrol in IT skills programmes run by the Information Services department but it is not part of every school's curriculum. Unlike at TEC, students would not have the same

access to computer labs unless it is an essential part of their degree. Nowadays, there are more computer labs open to students and sometimes shared by several schools; nevertheless, access to computers and IT training is still limited. According to one of the studies made by ANUIES (National Association of Higher Education Institutions), students from the public universities have less access to computers and information technology than those in the private universities. The point to argue here is that although having more access to information technology is not a guarantee that students would use it mainly for educational purposes, having the skills to use it becomes a plus in the labour market and a factor that influences their experience through university:

...because they (students) have different cultural baggage, distinct scholar training and also different social status, a situation that is very important in the process of students socialization and in the form that they are situated in the teaching-learning process at the university. (Casillas et al 2001: 139)

A second point of comparison between both universities in terms of organisational practices and learning opportunities is the students' mobility programs implemented by both institutions as one of the strategies of their missions. As a strategy for internationalisation, TEC has signed at least 300 agreements with several universities abroad⁹⁵ and students can study and transfer their credits between these institutions. This system works in a similar way to the ERASMUS program across Europe. In fact, many universities in the ERASMUS program have agreements with TEC. This strategy increases the opportunities for students to travel abroad at least once in their course of studies, live on their own or away from their family, improve their knowledge of a second or third language and get to interact with people from other cultures. UANL as an institution has also some programmes for undergraduate students to go on exchanges to both national and international universities. However, most of the exchanges are done at a national level, being a less costly option for the university and for the students. The opportunities for mobility are more limited for UANL students and so are their opportunities for foreign language learning, travel, independence and cultural

⁹⁵ TEC official website www.itesm.mx

interaction. While this could not be always considered a disadvantage altogether, it does seem to affect the way students talk about the opportunities that being in such university can bring them. This difference in university practices is often related to budgetary factors and other times to general infrastructure. In order to sign agreements with other universities, the local institution (TEC or UANL) would need to offer the same type of courses and facilities that the students are getting abroad as part of the exchange. They would also need to be accredited by certain international bodies in order to facilitate the transfer of credits between universities. While the options for courses would not pose a problem for UANL, facilities and accreditation could. Up to now, TEC has been accredited by more international bodies than UANL, increasing its chances for more international exchange programs for its students.

The third point to discuss in terms of differences in institutional habituses is the students' involvement in extracurricular activities and personal development programmes. This is important not only because it is linked to organisational practices but because it deals with values and attitudes students may develop from getting involved in such practices. In terms of the habitus influence on students, this may suggest that students who have more chances to interact with other students and develop more their interpersonal skills by interacting with people on different levels (school, fun activities, sport teams) stand better chances of developing a positive attitude towards "life" or experience in the university, as pointed out in previous studies (Casillas et al, 2001). Although both institutions have a programme for extracurricular activities as an important part of students' welfare and encourage students to participate in them, there could be significant differences in the levels of participation in both institutions. In my study, there were more mentions of participation in extracurricular activities and interaction outside of classroom made by the TEC students than by those at UANL. The reason for this, as I speculate from my findings, is less a matter of university practices and more of differences in the characteristics of the student population. Different studies in universities in the USA (Pike, G., Kuh, G. & Gonyea, R., 2002: 259) have showed that:

The direct and indirect effects of students' college experiences on their gains provide convincing evidence that what happens in college does make a difference... and that the nature of students' educational experiences varies substantially from campus to campus.

It is not which university offers more options but which students have more time to participate in such activities.

As pointed out by Casillas (2001) one of the problems with public universities is that they keep treating the student population as a homogenous group when students have very different characteristics. They expect them to have time to participate in extra activities when due to their outside responsibilities some of those students can barely spend the required hours in the classroom. What these previous studies addressed were problem of a non-flexible curriculum and lack of provision for differences in learning styles. The relevance of these studies for my research is the fact that if students cannot spend more time in extracurricular activities, they get fewer chances of interacting with other students outside the classroom. This could be related to the levels of stress and sacrifice of their social life that they repeatedly mentioned in their writings. During my time working for the private university, for example, I saw students getting involved in organising conferences, workshops, cultural fairs and exhibitions, something I did not see to the same extent at the public university. The type of organisational, negotiation and communication skills developed by engaging in these activities as well as their participation in doing voluntary work as part of their community service becomes 'a plus' in their CVs when they graduate. The bottom line in this discussion is that although both university habituses seem to offer similar programs like mobility, extracurricular activities, community service for students to develop certain skills and attitudes, it is the students who have more time to invest in those programs that get more benefit from them in the end. Although this difference in participation is not directly linked to the practices of the institution, it seems to be connected to the type of students each university enrolls (Thomas, 2000).

At the heart of this discussion is the idea that institutional habitus through its the organisational practices is influential in the way students identify themselves. Drawing on the abilities and attitudes they may develop from their experience in travelling, meeting people from different cultures, speaking different languages and organising events, students from TEC may feel more confident and carry this into their identity as better and more capable graduates. This public identity of “better candidates” is positively reinforced by the labour market hiring more graduates from the private universities than from the public ones⁹⁶ (section 5.1.1). The role of the evaluation of the ‘Others’ (academics, employers, classmates, etc.) in the formation of identity (Larrain, 2000; Hall 2002; Jenkins, 1996) appears as a strong element in my study especially when people (including students themselves) talk about getting a job. There is a constant evaluation of graduates from the different universities and the privileged position of private university graduates is common knowledge. For example, numerous jokes talk about what happens when a UANL and a TEC student applies for a job: the former is expected to show what he/she can do; the latter only needs to show the diploma. This public image of superiority /inferiority surrounding university graduates gives students a message that their identities are different because of the university they attend. This may lower the image public university students have of themselves and the aspirations regarding their academic degree and successful future. On the other hand, it may also work as an incentive to work harder and succeed.

5.3.3 Gendered disciplines

The gender division according to discipline found through this study where female students congregate more in social sciences (54.86% social science and 45.14% science) while males take up more science degrees (84.39% science and 15.61% social science) brings to light the discussion on the topic of gendered identities and gendered academic choice long studied by researchers on gender and education (Thomas, K., 1990;

⁹⁶ 31.6 percent of public university graduates versus 53.9 percent from private ones (Reyes, 2001).

Anderson & Williams, 2001; Letherby, G. & Shiels, J., 2001; Lunn, P., 2001; Walker, 2002). According to their research, the segregation in professions starts from their time as students. According to Kim Thomas, segregation starts at school: “the occupational segregation of men and women which takes place after education is completed is related to the subject segregation which takes place at school” (Thomas1990: 3). In order to understand how this segregation may have an impact on students’ identity in university, it is important to see the connotations constructed around the academic subjects. The connotations of masculinity and femininity associated with science and social science respectively bring stereotypes of difficulty and value for the first and easiness and lack of worth for the second (Thomas 1990: 33). These connotations create a certain ethos around the disciplines “academic subjects are not neutral; they are ‘cultures’ each with its own way of perceiving and interpreting the world” (Becher 1981 in Thomas 1990: 8). This culture includes the practices and views that predominate in the academic disciplines constituting another example of ‘habitus’ inscribed inside the institution. The expectations of male and female students could be influenced by this habitus as well as the way they identify themselves as graduates of ‘science’ or ‘social science’. The choices of discipline by gender as well as difference in number of female and male students are evidence of this influence in my study. The characteristics of the student population and their subject choices seem to have a reciprocal influence on the nature of the institutional habitus reproducing stereotypical scenarios where students’ academic choices and identities may seem even predictable. Although it would seem like a long-known and almost historical divide, gender division in academic choices keeps appearing as a sign of some of the traditional views still held in contemporary education:

Gender remains an issue even as the visibility and confidence of women works to destabilise traditional patterns” and although “things have changed significantly for young professional women, they and their male peers still reinscribe dominant notions of femininity and masculinity. (Walker 2002:75)

Another aspect of institutionalised habitus and gender is the fact that in my sample, as well as in many universities in Mexico, male students outnumbered female students (59 % males and 41% females) and although more women have gone into universities in the last 30 years, the access continues to be unequal. This common pattern in HE in Mexico (Rodriguez, R., 1999; de Garay, 2002; Casillas et al, 2001) is again a reflection of the traditional system that still operates in these universities. The statistics of ANUIES 97 show this inequality as well as the imbalance in academic choices by gender. The issue of inequality has been established by several studies in the UK (Coffey, 2001; Anderson & Williams, 2001) and in a country with a poor economy this only represents a fraction of the total picture of inequalities lived by women in the provision of other services like medical care and human rights, not only in education. ⁹⁸

The world of professions is also highly gendered (as discussed on the previous page), and although there have been advances in the incursion of women in areas traditionally 'inhabited' by men; the road to equality seems to be still long. The tendency for women and men to choose a particular field of study was not part of this study; however, the sample used reflects the nature of the student population in the universities involved and gender could not be ignored. The link between this and the study of identity construction has important implications. First, the divide between gender and fields of study and professions keeps being produced and reproduced in the universities (Thomas, 1990) sending the message that the divide can be predictable and to some extent 'normal.' In the name of 'normality' gendered identities and gendered positions are developed and if necessary, perpetuated, "the worst voice of higher education is its compliancy: its belief that because it has always operated in a certain ways, it should always continue to operate in the same way" (Thomas 1990: 182). In this respect, universities and other social spheres like the job market could be doing more to break away from this stereotypical allocation of degrees and genders. They could promote a more equal parameter for job and salary allocation for those jobs predominantly occupied by women.

⁹⁷ www.anuies.com.mx

⁹⁸ www.inmujeres.com.mx

Apart from ‘participation in society’ the differences found were not found the other themes were compared using the attributes of gender, type of institution attended and localization of the students. The similarities I found in the rest of the themes (values and attitudes related to HE, knowledge as an asset, education as social distinction, students’ expectations and positive views, job opportunities, students’ negative views and criticisms, and education as a family project) I grouped as ‘types of capital’ where they are seen as ‘exchanges and investments’ and will be discussed in section 5.4.

5.3.4 Participation in society, gender and localization

As previously mentioned (chapter 1), one of my research questions was to find out whether students linked education to participation in society and to what extent they identified themselves as agents in change. In this respect, female students scored higher than males and ‘foreign’ students higher than ‘locals’ (58.33% vs. 41.67%). As it appears in my study, the sense of ‘localization’, (being from the city or from outside) that students have plays an important part in defining how they react to the idea of studying to help their country. The answers from the female group and the foreign students reflect their belief that through education they could make a change in their community and/or in their country. There was a sense of solidarity in their answers as well as a conviction that by being educated they could help improve their surroundings; they also mentioned feeling good about themselves and being good citizens. These findings reflect one of the faces of the discourse on education for change and improvement of the community as well as for self-fulfilment found in the legacy of progressive and liberating education theory of Paulo Freire (1972; Rogers, 1996; Fabela, 2004). It also reflects the rhetoric of contemporary educational trends putting “an increased emphasis on notions of community, democracy, citizenship, participation and empowerment, set within the broader context of learning society” (Coffey 2001: 2). In terms of identity construction, students using this public discourse define who they are now and how they envision themselves to be in the future. It is this negotiation, pointed out by Jenkins (1996) as the dialectic sense of identity, which students make between the public (mission statements) and the private discourse (students’ answers)

that conforms and gives value to their present and future identity. It is in also this practical view of what happens in the process of identity construction that the 'agentic' identity of the students emerges, a concept I will discuss later on in the chapter.

A stronger tendency of female students to participate in society could be explained by looking at both traditional and modern points of view about gender. As suggested by Thomas (1990: 176) women's "experience of higher education might be confusing and contradictory" and sometimes framed by questions of conformity and rebellion to expected social roles. From a traditional point of view, women were expected, and still are, to some extent, to take a positive attitude towards solidarity and thus their interest in improving their community and their surroundings; perhaps intrinsic to this idea, is a strong association with the 'caring role' of women, characteristics 'normally' associated to mothers, wives, as well as traditionally female professions. On the other hand, one can also speculate from a more modern stand, that these female students see themselves as agents of change, with possibilities for inducing and carrying out change and raising their status against the prevalent atmosphere of gender discrimination. These would be women who would see education as a way of achieving liberation and self-empowerment. Because exploring further in their answers is beyond the scope of this study, both sides of the story would have to stay as possibilities open for discussion or further research, to avoid a fundamentalist position. Those who established the link between education and participation in social change expressed their desire to have a university degree in order to raise their country's profile through having more educated people. Others mentioned participating in education itself, for example, by educating children in Mexico. The general belief was that by being educated they could help improve the country in the profession they had.

In the case of 'localization', the high interest in participation in society in the 'foreign' students could be associated with a notion of identification with a place. In addition to the motives expressed by female students, there was an element of identification with a geographical location that influenced their answers. The role of space in identity

construction is an important factor especially now that mobility has become a relevant characteristic of young people's life (Castells, 1997; Featherstone, 1990). The way students identify themselves as 'foreign' shows how well integrated they feel into the life of the city where they are studying; even students who lived in the same city but far away from the university campus tended to identify themselves as 'foreign.' This fact is of particular interest because it reflects their sense of belonging to a particular location as well as the connotation of 'community' they may have in mind. For 'foreign' students, improving their community after they graduate is expressed as a responsibility, a need for repayment, for giving something back, especially if they are from a different country or in some cases, from some of the States in Mexico that are less economically developed. On the same issue of repayment, while 'locals' predominantly mentioned repaying their families, 'foreign' students refer to their community in the repayment as well. This desire to repay could be due to the extra investment foreign students have to make by living away from their families and having to deal with more issues organising their lives on their own in a different city. In the case of the local students who do not face the same circumstances, going to university may be seen as an entitlement and perhaps they feel less responsibility to repay.

5.4 The capital identity: exchanges and investments

Moving on from the idea introduced in the beginning of this chapter that an institutional habitus can be altered, influenced and thus become flexible; it is possible to recognize areas where the traditional version of a more stable and determining habitus still operates in some practices of the universities. In the following section, I will discuss how although the habitus of an institution may have predominant messages, individuals still make choices and accommodate these messages to the best of their interests. I would argue that in my study individuals make choices on how they use education. What the institutions present to them is one thing, but how they interpret these statements and incorporate them in their choices of identity is another. A common way to do this, as reported in the present study, is to seek in higher education a potential for

exchange and or investment, a type of capital which would then be used as a personal feature of their identity.

Involved in this process of transformations and development of their identity, there is a constant making of decisions, evaluation of options and internalising of new ideas on how to interpret their actions and those of others. Students decide, for example, which friends are good connections for their future career; which club or association will give them more benefits in terms of learning a new skill or improving their health. They also choose to present themselves as competitive, analytical learners, for example, using the language used in media, in the mission statements and in a way that gives them the status of educated people. Their writings include notions of what would be the ideal engineer, accountant, lawyer, journalist, language teacher; the ideal educated citizen. It is not possible to know through this study how much their discourse has changed since they were high school students, for example; however, it is possible to trace how much of it resembles the predominant messages they read or hear at present. Students seem to be choosing and changing their points of view depending on how they want to be seen by their teachers, their peers, and perhaps even by the researcher in this case. This decision making implies reflecting upon old and new beliefs and deciding what to keep or let go. To account for this reflexivity, Giddens' notion of agency and its emphasis on the active and reflective character of human action states:

The reflexive monitoring of activity is a chronic feature of everyday action and involves the conduct not just of the individual but also of other. That is to say, actors not only monitor continuously the flow of their activities and expect others to do the same for their own; they also routinely monitor aspects, social and physical, of the contexts in which they move (Giddens 1984: 5).

The different meanings students attach to higher education looking at it as an investment or as a symbol of status, as well as the benefits they get from it such as better possibilities for a job and perhaps class flight, are a further indication of the degree of reflexivity they engage in. As an example, students' low interest in

participating in society and in criticising and evaluating their own educational system, stands in contrast with the institutions' promise of making critical individuals committed to the development of their communities. Another example of this contrast is the students' reaction to engaging in alternative modes of learning like teamwork and autonomous learning which was low in their preferences. These are instances of the exercise of individual choice, of interpretation of dominant discourse according to personal interests and of a process of 'negotiation' between what is offered and what is taken. These are examples of reflexivity and individual agency.

As previously discussed (section 5.3.4), 'participation in society' was one of the themes that that students wrote less about in their answers. This is an interesting finding because it contrasts with the strong emphasis on this issue found in the official discourse. This marked interest in linking HE to the development of the country appears in the expected profile of the students as well as in the way academics talk about the engagement of students as agents of change. It is part of the justification for university education and a good way to validate the role of HEIs in society. What my study reveals is that the link between HE and participating in society is not very clear for the students. Some of the speculations I made in the beginning were related to a lack of interest by the students; however, as I further analysed the data I realised that the references to participation and promoting social change that the students wrote about were more related to individual goals and individual projects rather than to social action or collective projects. This was also confirmed by the views of some of the academics when they talked about what students did as social work or when they talked about students' plan in the future. This apparent shift of interest in participation in society towards interest in personal goals seems to be an indication of the process of individuation students are going through as they build their self-identity (Giddens, 1991). This process of individuation encourages people to elaborate an individual understanding of what happens around them and internalise it and make it part of their identity when they see it necessary (Castells, 1997). Students from both institutions are exposed to the messages of participation in society communicated to them through many channels; however, what seems to be imperative for them at the moment is

engaging in their personal goals and solving more immediate issues such as thinking what job they will have, befriending who could be a better connection for their future or enjoying their social life. These personal issues seem to take precedence over social concerns like doing something to improve their community or their country, projects they might see of bigger scale. A similar situation is experienced with some of the so-called transferable skills highly emphasised in the models of education at the universities studied. Students are encouraged to be critical and reflexive of their contexts as well as to engage themselves in collaborative work and autonomous learning yet their answers do not point in this direction and rather than responding positively towards this, most students complain about it.

What can be deduced from here is that students take from the institutional messages and goals whatever they find 'appropriate' 'valid' and 'of personal concern' depending on their present situation. These are the expressions of individuality that talk of an 'agentic' identity, an identity that is constructed by reflecting upon the choices being presented and internalising them to a higher or lesser degree. Mike Michael refers to this as the construction of flexible identities commonly found at present. According to him, there are "various linguistic, social, cultural resources through which identity is constituted" and there are different ways in which "these resources are variously imposed, adopted, appropriated or resisted in the process of 'doing identity'" (Michael 1996: 9). As their identity is in transition, developing and (re)constructing, students need this flexibility as a mechanism to cope with the changing conditions of everyday life. This mechanism requires a constant self-reflexion (Giddens, 1991) and evaluation. Their personal interests mediate their choices and are involved in defining the construction of their identity as people who would be interested in social issues, self-centred, reflexive and critical, accepting; independent learners, or collaborative workers.

5.4.1 The exchange identity: degrees, connections and attitudes and values

The different studies in the literature review (see chap. 2) reported on the influence of educational institutions in relation to academic achievements and attitudinal changes, retention rates and students' integration in university life, among others. The following section presents what students in this study perceived as benefits of HE regardless of the institution they come from, their gender or 'localization'. These benefits which I have labelled as 'exchanges' or 'investments' refer to the areas of knowledge ('cultural'), values and attitudes as well as social contacts that students say they can acquire or improve by doing a university degree.

One of the concepts most closely related to the term of 'exchange identity' is that of cultural capital introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1990) and used in studies related to educational contexts as well as in the development of critical theory (Calhoun, 1995; Beaseley-Murray, 2000). Bourdieu classified capital in different ways: economic capital (wealth), cultural or informational capital (knowledge) and social (connections and group membership connections) (Calhoun 1995; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). For Bourdieu, besides the material or economic capital, there were 'immaterial forms' that "with varying levels of difficulty it is possible to convert one of these forms into the other" (Calhoun 1995: 140). The way people acquire these types of capital was through their social interactions, thus it is constituted by "the social products of a field or system of relations through which individuals carry out social intercourse" (Grenfell & James 1998: 18). I have reclassified these three types of 'immaterial capital' as quoted by Calhoun (1995) by introducing one which refers to the values and attitudes students report as gains in my study. These classification of capitals can be associated with different types of identities: first is the degree identity based on the economic and cultural value students give to a university degree; the second one is the networking identity based on the social connections students make while at university and the third one is the moral identity based on the values and attitudes students have pointed out as a

benefits they get from their university education. The reason why I am taking attitudes and values as a form of capital is because I am looking at it as another resource students can use in order to achieve their purposes, for example to get a job or to belong to a group as I will discuss in section (5.4.4).

5.4.2 The degree identity and economic and cultural capital

The findings in my study suggest that students refer to HE as an investment and an asset in their lives, giving it a sense of capital. HE from their point of view is expected to pay dividends. Living in an era where knowledge can be treated as a product to be sold, bought, or exchanged (learning society) and where students can be the buyers or consumers of that product, it is not surprising that they would attach a utilitarian meaning to university education "...higher education has recently been more overtly commodified and reduced to its exchange value on the labour market (Anderson & Williams 2001: 30). Their responses indicated that one of the reasons they were in university education was to get a degree and capitalize on their opportunities to get a job, travel and move up the social ladder. These findings are congruent with other studies done in Mexico where the hopes attached to a university degree were the motor that kept students applying to universities despite the high rates of unemployment for graduates (Valle & Smith, 1993). Elizabeth Thomas (2000) in a study of UK universities also reports this as a strong reason for students to remain in universities despite economic difficulties. Part of the reason of this 'faith' in the university degree has to do with the notion that we are living in a learning society where in economy, politics civil society and private life knowledge becomes the tool which people use to negotiate the complexities of their everyday life (Muller & Subtozky, 2001). With the emphasis put on the possession of knowledge as the key to unlock success in different areas of life, individuals feel 'invited' or compelled to engage in activities that would produce knowledge, that would give them a good or resource they can exchange. With knowledge transformed into a good, it becomes susceptible to the laws of supply and

demand: people can engage in the business of producing it, reproducing it, buying it and selling it. In the case of university education, the degree becomes a symbol of capital in these exchanges and represents something students can use in order to get what they want: a job, a higher self-esteem or social distinction.

From a Bourdieusian point of view, in a meritocratic society the dominant classes determine how academic qualifications are rewarded. This gratification can come in different ways, social distinction, economic rewards, and inclusion in a higher social class, if that benefits the dominant interests. The way students in my study talked about their degrees as something that would bring them recognition, status and employability echoes Bourdieu's idea. In this case, the discourse of the learning society with its over-validation of university degrees could be seen as dominant and it does seem to have an effect on students' belief they are investing in their future. The close relationship between what students say about what education may bring to their lives and what the mission statements promise underlines this point. While there is not an explicit promise of social distinction and higher social class in the universities' discourse, students tend to link their degree with these two concepts. Following a Bourdieu analysis, students' choices are determined by how the society (i.e. the labour market and social class circles) values their university degrees and they are following these beliefs with expectations of being rewarded in the end. From a different perspective, giving students a more active role in deciding what parts of the 'official' discourse to include or exclude in their own evaluation of the degree, one could say that students are taking from those beliefs on university degrees what sounds convenient for the type of identity they want to emphasise in this particular moment of their life (university time). The case of participation in society and being a critical individual discussed in the previous section are good examples of this. My study suggests that students are selective in what they choose to write or use in their discourse depending reflecting on it on their interests rather than simply following the dominant ideas found in the official ideology of education. These findings are in line with the process of self-identity construction deployed by Giddens (1991) where individuals reflect on what is happening around them (discourses) integrating into their identity internalising what they find 'more

useful or appropriate' in order to validate who they are. In this sense, these findings challenge the idea that dominant discourses shape and determine individual's choices without possibilities for the individuals to alter this influence. The fact that students decide which meanings of education to write about and which not, underlines the importance of their reflexivity in constructing their identity around the choices they make.

Whether students take a dominant discourse and make it their own or not, or to what extent they do, raises interesting questions as to the type of identity they are constructing as they make these choices. Following the idea that a university degree is 'exchangeable' leads students to make different evaluations of it. They need to see it as a good investment of the time, money and the 'sacrifices' they and their families are making. In this evaluation not only are personal decisions involved, but there seem to be other factors and interests at stake. First, one of the parameters for students to evaluate their degree as capital depends on the type of job they want to get and most likely the type of income as well. The labour market for university graduates seems to be more demanding every day and the relationship between the profile they demand and what the university offers to students is crucial. If the labour market requires higher academic qualifications for better paid jobs, students may want to feel that the degree they are getting will make them more competitive to access this market. The degree then becomes a passport to a better job, to better income. It is helping them construct an identity that fits a labour market and at the same time promises to fulfil their personal aspirations. Their choice to use this degree as a powerful card in the game is important in validating their identification as university people.

Another influence in their evaluation of their degree seems to be the expectations of the family. As noted in some of the quotes given by students, sometimes being a university student and a parent implies setting an example for the children; other times, being the first graduate in the family puts a considerable stress on getting the degree. In the cases where there are financial difficulties, getting the degree serves the purpose of redeeming

the expense. All the above suggest that there is more than one factor involved in the students' view of the degree as a source of capital, of education as something good for the future and of investment worth the sacrifice. It involves the labour market, the family, peer appreciation, and personal aspirations "individuals then have contradictory subjectivities constituted through their participation in a range of discourses" (Anderson & Williams 2001:8). All these views contribute to students making their identity something that is nurtured, enriched and given more potential by a university degree. They are aware of the exchange and they are willing to use it. To say that it is only a dominant discourse that is driving students' decisions and interpretations of their degrees would be a limited point of view since it is exactly the intersections within the discourses which are important.

Warmington's study (2000) of ACCESS students, a HE program in the UK, revealed that although there was a strong link between the value of the degree in the labour market and the students' aspirations to go back to HE, there was also a strong aspiration for personal development that affected their decision to return. He identifies HE identity as 'transitory' which, among other factors, consisted of present and future aspirations. My findings offer a further indication of this relationship. Students are not only concerned about the value of the degree as a symbolic token to exchange for a job, but they are also looking for social recognition, status and validation of their identity as educated people. In this sense, an idea of the degree as economic capital and the passage to wealth would appear relatively limited by accounting only for economic interests. There is a need for a concept of capital that includes more of a personal value, "...a form of personal capital, independent from the value it has in the labour market" (Warmington 2000: 287). Such a version of this new form of capital brings it from the economic to the personal, from something that is given a meaning 'from outside' (labour market) to something that has a meaning 'from inside' (personal view). These changes reflect the dynamic way in which people assign meaning to things independent from what they mean outside. It also shows how individuals can manipulate these meanings to bring a sense of worth and self-improvement. It is evidence of the agency individuals can apply in establishing who they are and defining their identities. In this

elaboration of meanings, individuals and social structures interact in a complex way in order to keep a balance or sense of certainty (ontological security) where both can always resort to established routines or procedures to assert a (safe, congruent) place in society (Giddens 1991:36; Bryant & Gary, 1991). Students know that getting a degree means that they stand a better chance for a better income (a structuring job market) and they invest time and money into their education. At the same time, they give other values to this degree so that the labour market is not the only factor that makes their degree important; they look at social recognition and personal development as important dividends as well. Knowing that status is not the only thing that will count in order to be competitive in the market, they resort to the economic value of the degree and comply with the labour market by obtaining higher qualifications. This is the interaction given between the personal agency and the social structures, called 'structuring structures' in order to generate certainty and order in human interactions (Giddens 1984; Grenfell & James, 1998). It is this view of social structures as 'generative rules and resources' (Giddens, 1997 in Bryant & Gary 1991: 7) which allows for an understanding of social practices where structure is not always constraining human agency but also providing a base to enable it. The presence of dominant discourses emphasising competitiveness and qualifications serves as the platform for students to strive for higher academic preparation and over evaluation of their degree, a higher potential as an investment. By embracing some of the ideas in this discourse, students transform educational capital into personal capital.

5.3.3 Networking identity and social capital

Besides regarding their university degree as an asset in the labour market, a high percentage of students (44.41%) pointed out socialising, making friends and establishing connections as another important aspect of university education. By prioritising these exchanges students develop what can be called a networking identity. Students' interest in making friends and socialising is mixed with their interest in meeting someone as a potential business partner, a link to a job and a better social status puts an extra ingredient in these interactions and emphasises the importance of

networking. This emphasis on connections is linked to the notion of social capital where relationships and norms have value, in that they enable individuals and groups to cooperate for mutual benefit” (Ecclestone & Field 2003: 267). The way in which students write about classmates and academics as ‘connections’ may influence their interactions and also what benefits they see from these interactions. My argument is that besides the cultural capital just discussed, the social relations and connections made through HE could sometimes become more important than the degree itself. This puts additional value not only to the friendships they make at the university but to the university itself as a place where they can make more ‘profitable’ contacts.

Although the notion of social capital is not new (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1991) research indicates that networking has become more relevant currently (Castells, 1997; Winter, 1998; Putnam, 2003). The notion of networking identity I am introducing in this discussion is closely related to the concept of social capital as introduced in educational studies by James Coleman (1988). Coleman defines social capital from a functional point of view as “resources that they [actors] can use to achieve their interests” (Coleman 1988: 101; brackets inserted), a definition closer to what I have called ‘exchanges’ in this study. Coleman, in contrast with Bourdieu, looks at it more as a resource, a positive gain to be used for a particular interest, instead of an example of structural over individual interests. Ian Winter in his study of Australian families and social capital offers an interesting comparison between the theoretical frameworks of both authors concluding that instead of conflicting or contradictory, their definitions of social capital are overlapping: “They employ the concept of social capital to understand different types of collective action and pitch their analyses at different social scales...but the definitions ... effectively refer to the same social processes...” (2002:14). Coleman uses the concept to analyse individuals in family settings while Bourdieu’s analysis is mostly on class competition. Without neglecting Bourdieu’s view that dominant discourses could determine people’s actions to a high degree, I still find his concept of capital valid in explaining what individuals can accumulate or amass as part of their social interactions. However, Coleman’s functional and positive point of

view on the same concept offers more room to account for individuals' agency and the power of choice, something I have found recurrent in my study.

Following Coleman's notion of social capital, these connections and friendships students make in university are resources they plan to use in the future. Both in the private and the public university, getting to know someone who can be a job connection in their future is seen as a great advantage. Although both types of students emphasise the importance of 'connections', I found that they have a different view of who these 'connections' could be. In the public university, students see academics as part of these potential contacts and put them in a scale higher than their classmates. In the private university, otherwise, academics are mentioned in second place and students seemed to rely more on their connections with other classmates. Their expectations are finding a good partner to start a business in the future, for example, and their first option was not the academics but their classmates. A possible explanation for this difference in students' expectations could be that the ones from the public university may engage sooner in the labour market and in the public sector than in a business project. This could make them see in academics a positive connection to get a letter of recommendation or a contact name. The students from the private university, on the other hand, mention opening more job opportunities and starting a business instead of taking up a job or looking for letters of recommendation. This entrepreneur attitude is part of what the private institution emphasises through its practices and messages and students take that almost as a given for their future as graduates. The public university also has programmes to motivate entrepreneurship, yet students do not seem to take this as a first option when they write about jobs and connections. In a study about the divide between the private and the public education in Mexico, de Garay (2002) concluded that the public university students keep taking the role of 'pioneers' while the private university graduates took that of 'inheritors'. His ideas were based on Bourdieu's work on *The Inheritors* where the pioneers are students who are the first to have a university degree in their family, the ones to start the tradition for education and probably facing more struggle to succeed. The inheritors, on the other had, are the students coming from a family with high academic credentials and who would be the beneficiaries of that

system and the type of network established by this 'academic' past in their family. Although de Garay's study reveals important aspects about the inequalities in resources students count on to approach university education and the labour market, it pictures a student population with an apparent limited initiative to succeed and make progress. Such views leave little room to account for the individual efforts made by students to attend university. Contrary to the marked divide de Garay reports, my study shows that students from both types of universities are willing to look for connections and to use them to improve their future. Students from the public university are challenging the deterministic view of the role of 'pioneers' classified as de Garay's study.

Social connections and social networks seem to be a crucial contemporary element for success. For example, business people's potential for making deals and success can be measured by the amount of contacts they have (Putnam 2004). The emphasis on making contacts in my study demonstrates that students are aware of its importance and are getting ready to improve their opportunities to get a job by not only relying on their degree but also improving their contacts. These findings contrast with one of my initial ideas that students seemed to be unaware of the reality of the job market and that they were relying almost entirely on their degrees to secure them a job. Although my argument is not refuted altogether by these findings, it does suggest that, at least in terms of connections and their importance in their future, students have a better understanding than I had speculated in the beginning.

5.4.4 Moral identity: attitudes and values 'capital'

University students' emphasis on values and attitudes as part of what they get from university education over other themes reported in this study (family, participation in society, social recognition, etc.) suggests that an important part of their identity is linked to these two factors which I have referred to as moral identity. My argument for introducing attitudes and values as another form of capital follows the logic of Bourdieu's theory of capital whereby people in their struggle for appropriation of goods

in the social world, make use of the different powers or forms of capital they have available like aces in a game of cards (Bourdieu, 1987). On the same lines, Calhoun writes that in the social world described by Bourdieu “the motive force of social life is the pursuit of distinction, profit, power, wealth, etc.” then “Bourdieu’s account of capital is an account of the resources people use in such pursuit” (Calhoun 1995: 141). It is in this sense that attitudes and values become a moral capital that students are willing to exchange in their pursuit of a job, social recognition or wealth. One example where this can be seen is the way most job interviews target the ideal profile of candidates based not only on their skills but also on the attitudes and values they can bring to the workplace. Among the answers they seem to be looking for are being willing and able to work in teams, to work with culturally diverse people; exercise good values of responsibility and honesty in the work environment, for example. In this sense, their ‘moral profile’ can be ‘appealed to’ in order to fill in the prospective job profile. Another example when students could resort to using this ‘moral capital’ is in the application for grants, scholarships and internships where the acceptable profile includes not only what the person knows (cultural capital) but also what other ‘attributes’ can make them the ideal candidate. The latter is commonly requested from organisations as a ‘letter of interest’, or section titled ‘achievements in your life’, or ‘exceptional skills,’ to mention a few examples.

The constant reference students make to the concepts of attitudes and values provides evidence of the development of this type of moral identity and is concurrent with Warmington’s notion (2000) that students’ identity is multi-layered and transitory. The changing and developmental nature of students’ values and attitudes through further education is also pointed out by the extensive studies carried out in the US (Chickering, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Astin, 1993). My findings are in line with Chickering’s model of identity (1993: 51) which indicates that during their years in College, students get involved in developing a certain sense of integrity. This is also validated by Rogers (1996:36) as he writes about the type of ‘characteristics’ adult students develop through education. This means that the values and beliefs that they may have acquired through family, church, school, media, etc. and which so far

provided the foundation for interpreting experience may be revised, criticised and eventually some of them personalised until being integrated into the new identity. My study points out ways in which this 'renewed' set of values gives the students a congruent identity by matching their personal actions with the social behaviour expected. From the point of view of socialisation, this gradual integration and evaluation of beliefs is also supported by Peter Collier's discussion (2000) on the role of acquisition theory on identity formation. According to this theory, once students understand their expected role(s), they negotiate their identity according to such expectations; they would introduce changes in their system of values and attitudes that would make them 'fit' to the expected roles. In my study, the expected profile of the students according to the university mission statements suggests that they should be persons who respect and follow the attitudes and values promoted by such institutions. By expressing how high they value these two elements, students' are making their profile 'fit' the expectations of the university and the social roles they are supposed to play as educated people, successful graduates, good citizens, etc.

This study suggests that the emphasis students place on values and attitudes may respond to a combination of developmental and socialisation reasons in the process of identity construction. On the developmental side, students write about acquiring some values (i.e. discipline, independence) and reinforcing others (honesty, responsibility) evaluating some of the previous assumptions they may have had about what they could expect to face in university (i.e. students living away from home face more responsibilities). As to socialisation, their answers prove that they are engaged in constructing a type of identity that fits what is expected of them in the present as well as when they become graduates. This interaction between the present identity and the future identity confirms the notion of transitory and developmental; additionally, it adds the element of dynamism and agency inherent in a more comprehensive concept of identity. My study gives evidence of the diversity and complexity involved in the study of identity formation exploring it as a multilayered phenomenon where one-sided notions or interpretations would not suffice the argument; where the institutions' as well as the students' characteristics play a dynamic role influencing each other. It is

important to acknowledge the fact that universities through their organisational practices (habitus) have an influence on the type of identities students develop. They also have a role in grouping individuals with specific characteristics (gender, social class, preference for fields of study) creating a site where all these different interests interact and conjugate to promote certain types of identities. As to the students, their different backgrounds, goals and visions of their future are reflected in their identity formation process “just as individuals are not just consumers, competitors and taxpayers, so students are not just degree seekers and test takers” (Chickering 1993: 41). Through this study, it has been possible to explore how the construction university students’ identity is a process enriched through different channels: cultural, as acquisition of knowledge and skills; social, in the ability and interest of students to create networks and connections; and moral, as they evaluate their assumptions and beliefs in the light of new expectations both personal and collective and integrate them as part of their identity. The different types of identities identified in this study as well as their different sources also point to the fact that they are not independent of each other, that some of their definitions can cut across similar concepts (like cultural and moral capital) and that the fact that their analysis is context-situated makes them evolutionary by being subject to individual (agency) and social changes (structure).

After the discussion of the different types of identities and their relationship to types of capitals, now I will turn to take a final reflection as to the extent to which this research could provide answers and insights into the original aims of the study. In these final reflections, I shall also include the ways in which I think this study could be connected to wider issues in educational research, ideology and methodology under the title of ‘implications.’ Thinking about the possibilities of improving and further developing some of the issues that may have not been fully addressed in this research, I have also reflected on where this can research go from here and have given my suggestions in the following chapter as well.

6. FINAL REFLECTIONS, IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Introduction

The present chapter presents the final reflections I have come to after carrying out this study going from revisiting the main aims of the research and the theoretical frameworks to thinking about the possible implications the study may have. A final section in the chapter looks at suggestions for future research as a way to reflect on what could be done in some areas of research to further develop some of the issues raised in this research.

6.1 Final reflections

As a final reflection, I would like to comment on the ways in which the design of this study could offer answers and insights to the research aims proposed at the beginning both through the theoretical perspectives and methodology proposed. Some of these reflections have been partly included in the previous chapter as I discussed the findings; some others will be taken up again in the implications of the study; however as a matter of reflection and summary, I shall present them here.

One of the aims of my study was to see how HE was presented or ‘pictured’ by society and it was found possible to explore this by analysing the different discourses surrounding HE. Among these discourses, there were the views of the senior academics interviewed which along with the mission statements of the universities gave a idea of how sometimes the universities were positioned as ‘rescuers’, other times as ‘reformers’

and 'providers.' Through other sources reviewed such as newspaper articles and official documents such as the National Plan of Education this view seem to be reinforced. Another image of the universities was that of 'isolated' and independent from the society giving a sense of detachment as between the individuals who constitute the university (staff, students, academics) and those who constitute the society. So through the sources analysed in the study and the analysis of other discourses about HE it was possible to see how HE is presented as relevant for people at an individual (personal development) and social level (development of the country). As far as this view is supported by the theoretical framework used in this study, it is not difficult to establish connections between Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and the relevance of cultural capital in sustaining the value of academic credentials in our society these days.

Another aim in my research referred to how individuals position themselves in relation to education and how the 'ethos' of HE influenced this positioning. The response to this aim was explored by looking at the 'mission' or promise which says that HE develops successful individuals and societies. These messages create a social atmosphere (habitus by Bourdieu) which infers a certain position for the individuals 'in-habiting' it by creating in them the need to be educated, in order to be more highly valued. The interests of students to define themselves as educated people with certain values, skills and attitudes is revealed by the response they make towards this 'latent' need to be distinguished by having academic credentials. The way students encounter these messages of success and added value as graduates encourages them to give HE a strong personal meanings, a meaning that becomes their source of identity; they way they identify themselves as educated people, similar or different from Others. Jenkins' dialectical construction (1996) of identity and Giddens's notion of individuation were helpful to analyse how students 'used' part of the official discourse to construct the meanings HE had for them. By making these meanings part of their source of identity, they were using the resources they found available in the discourse to create a valid educational identity. This finding also made reference to the question of how students were incorporating as a 'private' discourse, the ideas found in the 'public' one.

In order to explore how students constructed their (educational) identity through the variety of meanings they attached to higher education, the methodology used to generate that data was more useful in some aspects than in others (as most methodologies). As a method to generate these meanings from a large sample, I believe the technique I used was appropriate. However, as my aim was to connect these meanings to types of identities developed, the technique could only provide certain data that I needed to organise and then connect to types of capital and their relationship to types of identities of the students. As I reflect on its application, I think perhaps a more narrative oriented approach could have given me a more direct way to connect the findings with the concept of identity. This is also an issue I address in the section of suggestions for future research.

In terms of identifying types of identities developed in HE contexts, as part of my aims, I found that although this was not as straightforward as I expected, it was still possible to frame the meanings students gave to university education under a model of construction of identity such as the ones advocated by Castells (1997) and Michael (1996). Here the identities are considered a process where individuals prioritise from the (discursive) resources available and integrate into their identity what helps them validate who they are for themselves and for others. So in this respect, it was possible to elaborate a classification of identities according to what the students believed to be meaningful 'exchanges' from education. Following Bourdieu's discourse on capital I could link the emergence of the degree identity, networking identity and moral identity to different types of capitals. This in itself is also an example of how this same discourse of 'exchanges' and capitals became influential in the way I conceived a personal and abstract concept as a detectable form of identity.

As I previously mentioned, some of these final reflections have been already pointed out under discussion of findings and the section that follows readdresses some of them and highlights them under the scope of the implications of the study. The purpose of writing about the implications of the study is to be able to put it into a wider perspective

and see its relevance and connections to other issues. These implications have links with the suggestions for further research as they establish the connections with other areas of research.

6.2 Implications of the study

The implications of my study could be related to the following areas: first are the implications for the ideology of education as to the lack of critique or challenge and the shift to a more instrumental and market-driven ideology; second, the use of biographical research in the methodological approaches to study identity construction in educational sites; third, the implications for educational practice in HE where a better understanding of students' identity issues could have an impact on the role of policy makers, lecturers and teacher trainers.

6.2.1 Implications for the ideology of education

According to the analysis of the official discourse from the universities, there are two things to point out. One, the type of ideology found in these public voices of HE talks of an education driven by the labour market and economic interests (as pointed in section 5.1). The marked interest in universities to please the labour market and supply what 'an abstract' society needs seems to be a rule for the universities' curriculum practices. Because this has positive results for students when they get a job, the practices followed are justified. What have been left out are the goals of an education to create critical thinkers who are able to improve their system of education, of government, of politics by reflecting on their actions. In this respect, the ideology found in the universities shows contradictions. On one hand, it is aiming to please a society producing graduates with the 'required' skills; on the other hand, because it is following an instrumental orientation, it is failing to produce in these graduates the critical thought expected from people who have been educated with progressive and liberating goals in mind. Two, a consequent implication of this is that the ideology of HE is working mainly at the level

of rhetoric. For example, students and academics repeat with little questioning the official messages about what knowledge, skills and attitudes have to learn in order to be a successful graduate. Another example is the rhetoric about using education for the development of the country which is present on paper but where little evidence is found in the minds of the students. For all these reasons, it appears important to point out the apparent 'recycling' of discourses found between the different areas involved in HE: official messages of the institutions go unchallenged by staff and students who in turn repeat part of these messages to 'enhance' or validate a public identity. As on paper, successful institutions produce successful graduates, they reciprocally give each other an image of successful identity which is reinforced by the use of a common discourse.

6.2.2 Implications for research methodology in identity studies

The second area where I think my study has implications is the methodological approaches used in educational research. Recent developments in this area acknowledge the fact that new ways of research are needed in order to account for the variety of changes educational settings present today (Cohen et al 2000). In the area of identity research, several studies have used biographical material; however, educational settings were usually approached through standardised (quantitative) methods due to the number of participants involved in the studies. In the studies with fewer participants the range of strategies were more varied since they could be done with less data. My experience using students' written accounts has been useful in conducting a study of a qualitative nature which also accounts for a reasonable sample in numbers. The introduction of computer software in this study was also relevant because it helped to deal with a large sample and facilitated the qualitative analysis. In this way, my study may suggest that it is possible to conduct qualitative analysis with a large amount of data and that the aid of the computer adds to facilitate the analysis in these cases.

This study reinforces the need to use a model of identity construction that situates itself dynamically between theory and practice. The long debate of structure over agency keeps inheriting models to analyse social practice favouring one over the other; however, when everyday practices are analysed the divide is blurred by the dynamism between the structural and the personal, the collective and the individual, the public and the private. There seems to be an ‘understood’ social game between agency and structure, a game individuals play because it is there where they find answers to basic questions like who they are and why they do what they do. Favouring structure over agency leaves the individual’s choices extremely restricted or limited. Favouring agency over structure would leave the individual in an ideal and unrealistic position which would clash with the most basic instances of structural power. Finding a balance between these two may be also ideal and unrealistic; however, it would bring more options for change, for renewal and improvement. It is important to have flexibility and openness in the models used to analyse social practices. If they remain static, their nature would contradict that of the changing practice. I believe that in the intent to break away from the traditional structure/agency dichotomy, social scientists have gone to extremes in order to tease out what works best in each context. Although this has been a valid position it does not do justice to the diversity and spontaneity of the reality they analyse. In my study, students’ realities sometimes fit the models but other times they go beyond them. There is a need for a model of identity construction that acknowledges the fact that there are structural factors that shape the experience of the students (Bourdieu’s model), in this case; however, this model would need to take into account that students also have the capacity for action, to exercise their agency (Giddens). It is essential to acknowledge the structures and understand the power they may have on individuals’ decisions in order to see possibilities for action, for challenge and change. Bourdieu’s model is helpful to make evident this power of structures; Giddens’s model can rightfully account for students’ agency. In his search for a less determinist approach he creates the ‘structuring mechanisms’ which are not, in fact, much different from Bourdieu’s dominant structures (see discussion in chapter 2). Therefore, in order to have a model that helps explain the logic of practice, it is necessary to take a more eclectic and open position.

6.2.3 Implications for HE practice

The last area where I think my study has implications is in coming to a better understanding of the diverse student population in the universities and what this could imply in terms of organisational practices for the HEIs. I have appreciated the diversity in students' motivations and goals as well as lifestyles and have reflected on the little attention universities as organizations pay to this diversity. In terms of students' welfare it was easy to spot the difference between both systems of education finding the public university with less attention to this issue. The inequality in the provision of resources between the private and public sector of education has also been relevant to suggest that there needs to be a more balanced allocation of resources if the country wants to put its development on the shoulders of higher education. The implications apply not only for the central authorities who assign budgets but also for the universities who may need to find alternative ways to fund their projects without depending only on students' fees or State funds.

As an educator, conducting this research has allowed me to have a closer look at what higher education means for students compared to what is being said by official documents and official views from academics. I believe the methodology used allowed me to see 'the human' side of the students' answers more. It has also encouraged me to have a more critical view of my role as lecturer, to analyze what my hidden curriculum may be teaching students about the value of university education. The small percentage of students who mentioned social participation, for example, made me reflect on how much my teaching promotes the idea of social change and students' involvement in it, how much of agents of social change they feel and how much of this is being addressed by other university practices other than teaching.

This new understanding of how students regard university education and how this shapes their identity has been influential and making me more critical of my role as a

lecturer, as a teacher trainer as well as a participant of committees where educational policies are developed. On a wider scale, I could modestly hope that my study could be of help for other researchers in the area of identity and its relationship to education who could find my methodological approach and /or my understanding of these issues helpful in understanding their particular contexts.

A final implication to mention for both theory and practice is in the conceptualisation of 'capitals' related to HE where attitudes and values have been identified as another resource in the students 'pack of cards' leading to a definition of a 'moral capital.' While there could be an argument that this comes under 'cultural capital', the latter has strong associations with social class (and hence can become deterministic). Moral capital cuts across class and gender and can be linked more to examples of agency. I have found the concept of capital useful to explain relationships between socio-economic background of students and choice of private versus public education institutions. It has also been useful to account for the importance that students give to connections and socialising. However, I found that a new concept of moral capital is necessary to explain how students rely on values and attitudes to make their profile more attractive, to use it in exchange of a positive image towards a possible job, scholarship, an even membership to the group of those with 'high values'. It seems that some years ago, it was not necessary to appeal to these values and attitudes as 'personal attributes'; however, more and more one can find them as parameters of the capital one person can have or strive for. There is the possibility in the future of this type of capital to become part of the reproductive cycle of meritocracy, for example, but for now it is something that needs to be accounted for as emerging.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

The areas for further research that I can foresee after doing this study are those related to issues of identity and education that were not fully addressed in this study due to its scope, as well as those emerging due to the changing nature of our times. I believe that

one of the areas where this study could be furthered is that of gender and its implications for studies of identity. The references and analysis I made in this study about gender differences, for example, would need to be furthered perhaps by developing a second stage of the study with a further data collection and more in-depth analysis. It is my understanding that although there seem to be more educational opportunities for women in higher education in Mexico, my study still reflects a certain degree of inequality between men and women attending universities. However, as my study includes only the largest HEIs in my area, there are still other institutions to study. Another area of future research could be a follow up of the lives students have as university graduates. As my speculations for future identity are based on what the students write about their expectations and dreams for the future, a follow up on their views as graduates could complement this area of my study.

A third area of future research could be the construction of academics' identity briefly touched upon in this study. This could also include a larger number of academics which would cover participants from different sectors and not exclusively heads of departments as this study did. A larger sample could give better insights, for example, as to how much of the 'parroting' of the official discourse extends through the different levels or if it is more in the higher positions. Last, there would be a need to test the methodology followed in this study to gather biographical information in different educational settings in order to see how it can be improved and in what other contexts it could be useful.

APPENDICES

- Appendix 1. Completed forms of biographical accounts**
- Appendix 2. Form for semi-guided interview**
- Appendix 3. ITESM's Mission statement**
- Appendix 4. UANL's Mission statement**

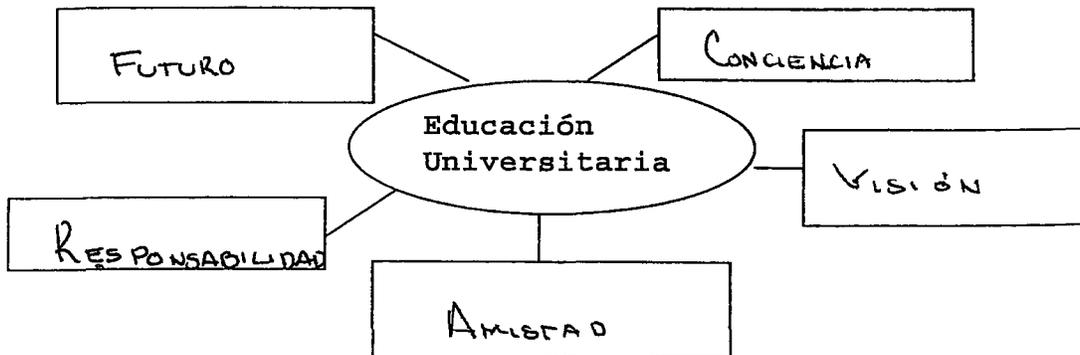
UANL ITESM Masc. Fem. Edad 19 Semestre 3^{er}

Carrera LEA Estudiante local Estudiante foráneo

¿De qué ciudad y Estado Monclova, Coahuila

¿Cómo podría comunicarme contigo si fuese necesario? adidas_131@hotmail.com

1. Escribe cinco palabras que relaciones con la educación universitaria:



2. En el siguiente espacio, escribe de qué manera estas palabras están relacionadas con tu vida. Si necesitas más espacio, puedes usar el reverso de esta hoja. Gracias por tu colaboración. Si deseas comunicarte conmigo puedes enviarme un correo electrónico a Lupita.Rodriguez@tiscali.co.uk

FUTURO: Lo veo así como mi futuro por q de esto voy a vivir, es mi porvenir.

CONCIENCIA: A este nivel es q verdaderamente tenga una mejor idea o visión de lo q realmente quiero hacer con mi vida estudiantil.

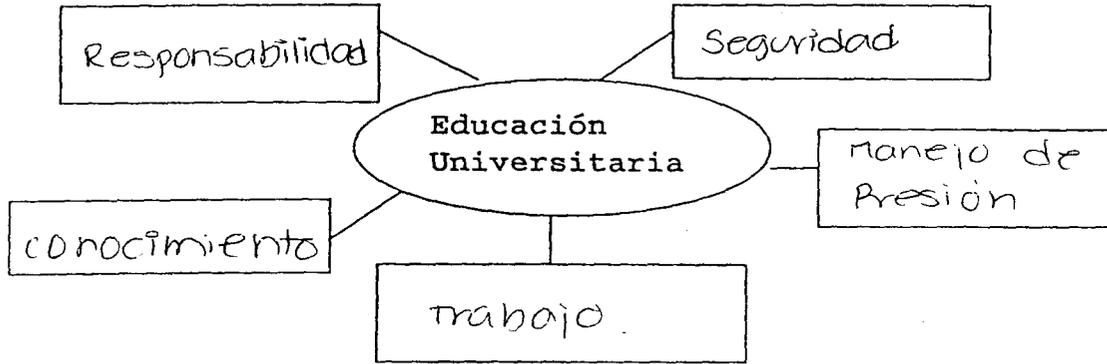
VISION: Permite tener una idea clara de hacia adonde voy.

RESPONSABILIDAD: Es mucho muy grande, no solo con mi familia sino conmigo mismo.

AMISTAD: Tan bien es muy importante conocer gente y entablar una amistad que siempre es necesaria para seguir adelante.

UANL ITESM Masc. Fem. Edad 21 Semestre 10^{to}
 Carrera IQA Estudiante local Estudiante foráneo
 ¿De qué ciudad y Estado Monterrey, N.L.
 ¿Cómo podría comunicarme contigo si fuese necesario? al588975@gmail.com, itesm.mx

1. Escribe cinco palabras que relaciones con la educación universitaria:



2. En el siguiente espacio, escribe de qué manera estas palabras están relacionadas con tu vida. Si necesitas más espacio, puedes usar el reverso de esta hoja. Gracias por tu colaboración. Si deseas comunicarte conmigo puedes enviarme un correo electrónico a Lupita.Rodriguez@tiscali.co.uk

Responsabilidad - creo que la educación universitaria nos da un sentido de responsabilidad muy importante que nos va a servir no solo en la rama laboral sino inclusive en nuestras vidas.

Manejo de Presión - Esto es algo con lo que nos vamos a topa siempre y saber manejarla es algo muy importante para no perder estabilidad.

Conocimiento - esto nos sirve mucho especialmente si nos vamos a dedicar a lo que estudiamos.

Trabajo - Nos da una precuente ventaja sobre los que no tienen educación universitaria para conseguir trabajo.

Seguridad - Nos podemos sentir respaldados (no confiados) pero si, saber que tenemos algo que nos ayuda.

Appendix 2. Form for semi-guided interview

Research methods: Active interviewing guide

Introducing the research : Guide questions

1. Introduce myself (if necessary)
2. Ask the interviewee if it is OK to record the interview.
3. State the purpose of your research.
4. Mention issues of confidentiality.
5. Describe the number of topics to cover in the interview and their length.
6. Ask the interviewee if there are any questions.

Topic area 1: Role of HEIs in society nowadays

-Opinion about the role of the HEIs in our days

Topic area 2: Relevant changes in the institution

-What changes have been made in the institution lately and what criteria have they followed to make those changes?

Topic area 3 Perception of students from an academic point of view

-What is your perception of students?
-To what extent do you see students involved or committed to their education, their community?

Topic area 4 Profile of the institution's graduates

-What is the type of students your institution is trying to produce?
-What is the profile of a TEC/UANL student?

Topic area 5 Additional comments by interviewee

_Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

Ending the interview

_Thank the interviewee for their time and talk about possible date of publication of results.

Appendix 3. ITESM misión statement

El Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey es un sistema universitario que tiene como misión formar personas comprometidas con el desarrollo de su comunidad para mejorarla en lo social, en lo económico y en lo político, y que sean competitivas internacionalmente en su área de conocimiento. La misión incluye hacer investigación y extensión relevantes para el desarrollo sostenible del país.

Perfil de los alumnos

El Tecnológico de Monterrey proporciona a sus alumnos una preparación académica que los hace competitivos internacionalmente en su área de conocimiento.

Valores y actitudes El Instituto promueve de una manera muy importante, a través de todas sus actividades, que sus alumnos sean:

- .honestos,
- .responsables,
- .líderes,
- .emprendedores,
- .innovadores
- .y poseedores de un espíritu de superación personal, y que tengan:
- .cultura de trabajo,
- .conciencia clara de las necesidades del país y de sus regiones,
- .compromiso con el desarrollo sostenible del país y de sus comunidades,
- .compromiso de actuar como agentes de cambio,
- .respeto a la dignidad de las personas y a sus deberes y derechos inherentes, tales como el derecho a la verdad, a la libertad y a la seguridad jurídica,
- .respeto por la naturaleza,
- .aprecio por la cultura,
- .compromiso con el cuidado de su salud física
- .y visión del entorno internacional.

Habilidades

Durante el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje el Tecnológico de Monterrey desarrolla en sus alumnos:

- .la capacidad de aprender por cuenta propia,
- .la capacidad de análisis, síntesis y evaluación,
- .el pensamiento crítico,
- .la creatividad,
- .la capacidad de identificar y resolver problemas,
- .la capacidad para tomar decisiones,
- .el trabajo en equipo,
- .una alta capacidad de trabajo,
- .la cultura de calidad,
- .el uso eficiente de la informática y las telecomunicaciones,
- .el manejo del idioma inglés
- .y la buena comunicación oral y escrita.

Appendix 4. UANL Mission statement

"La Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León es una institución de cultura superior, al servicio de la sociedad, descentralizada del Estado, con plena capacidad y personalidad jurídica. Tiene como fin crear, preservar y difundir la cultura en beneficio de la sociedad..." Ley Orgánica de la UANL, 6 de junio de 1971, artículo 1.

Misión

- formar profesionales, investigadores, maestros universitarios y técnicos, así como realizar y fomentar la investigación científica en sus formas básica y aplicada
- considerar los problemas regionales y nacionales.
- organizar, realizar y fomentar la creación artística en sus diversas formas de expresión, hacer participe a la comunidad de la cultura
- contribuir a la preservación del acervo cultural, nacional y universal.

La misión de la UANL plantea que sus estudiantes

- Adquirir un sentido de vida,
- Tener conciencia de la situación social
- Forjarse como seres humanos y profesionistas responsables.

Esto significa que el personal y los estudiantes deben

- **comprometerse con el desarrollo económico, científico, tecnológico y cultural de la humanidad,**
- **innovar y ser competitivos internacionalmente para lograr su desarrollo personal y alcanzar el progreso del país en el contexto mundial.**

Perfil del egresado de la UANL

Hacia los egresados se encaminan las acciones estratégicas. A ellos les corresponde ahora recibir, para que después sean capaces de dar. Así, los resultados del esfuerzo para alcanzar la Visión se palparán en su desempeño profesional dentro de la sociedad, de tal forma que

estamos ahora formando a las generaciones que el día de mañana contarán con las habilidades necesarias para seguir transformando los modelos de desarrollo y promoviendo más y mejores niveles de vida, a la altura de las naciones más competitivas del mundo.

Características fundamentales del perfil del egresado de la UANL2006:

Competitivo a nivel mundial:

El egresado será competitivo a nivel mundial por su formación y competencias.

Con un alto sentido humanista:

Al igual que el maestro, debe asumir los principios humanistas que promueve y practica la Universidad.

Honesto:

Debe tener un comportamiento correcto, afín a la verdad y ajeno a la simulación.

Responsable:

Debe saber cumplir con sus compromisos y obligaciones.

Trabajo en equipo:

Debe ser capaz de trabajar con otros profesionales y alumnos de su misma o diferente área de formación o especialidad.

Con espíritu crítico:

El egresado será capaz de saber ver y entender los problemas de su comunidad, así como la responsabilidad que se desprende de ser miembro de ella.

Comprometido con la Universidad y su entorno:

Será una persona sensible a las situaciones que lo rodean y actuará siempre con firmeza para promover una mejor sociedad.

Líder emprendedor con visión global:

Con un desenvolvimiento proactivo y propositivo; capaz de iniciar procesos, innovar formas y arrancar proyectos propios.

Con capacidad de convivencia intercultural:

Debe tener una visión comprensiva de la diversidad cultural y poder desenvolverse en cualquier país del mundo.

Conocedor de la tecnología y los sistemas de información:

Utilizará la tecnología y los sistemas de información como herramienta de aprendizaje y en su vida profesional.

Con alta velocidad de respuesta:

Los egresados de la UANL contarán con una gran capacidad de respuesta, sin descuidar la calidad de sus resultados profesionales.

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