









Educational guidance and continuous training of the university professor. Reflections from an experience in Ecuador

Orientación educativa y formación continua del profesor universitario. Reflexiones de una experiencia en Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the search for meaning in the tasks of university teachers has led to consider the importance of educational guidance as a type of pedagogical activity aimed at satisfying the change that involves preparing the teacher as a guide and facilitator of opportunities for dialogue and reflection with students so that they can understand their experiences, develop a sense of autonomous and conscious life, as well as an adequate configuration of their life project. However, in order to make this process a reality, teachers must assume educational guidance as the cornerstone of their pedagogical and didactic work. In spite of the clarity of this objective, the antecedents show the historical and present shortcomings that act to its detriment. Qualitative research based on observation, interviews, and focus groups was implemented, which yielded the diagnosis of the state of the question and guidelines for its improvement as the main results. These results led to the conclusion that it is necessary to implement teacher training processes solidly based on theoretical, empirical and practical principles.

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, the university has been identified as an important scenario for young people to give meaning to their life projects and to access the necessary learning to satisfy their need for individual and social development, but above all to be able to find the personal way in which they will contribute to their country through their professional activity and their citizenship training (Chan & Luk, 2021; Pedler et al., 2022; Pérez, 2022; Vaterlaus et al., 2021). These expectations are endorsed in multiple international documents that regulate Higher Education and establish guidelines for achieving



quality education, with special emphasis on the possibilities of offering opportunities for each student to develop as a person and professional and to become involved in the responsible search for solutions to the problems they face in their daily lives (Black, 2022; Miller & Orsillo, 2020; Navarro, 2021; Salimi et al., 2023).

In recent decades, the analysis of formative purposes has reshaped higher education pedagogy. Currently, it assumes the needs associated with transforming each activity into an organized formative influence, an opportunity to help, guide, and accompany the student. Whether individually or in groups, support is sought in the process of dealing with personal, professional, or social demands, which may be presented in a normative way or not, throughout their formative and life trajectories (Bledsoe et al., 2021; Dahir et al., 2019; Gilligan et al., 2019; Gleason & Hays, 2019).

Within this framework, various authors and institutions charge university faculty with the responsibility to act as guides and facilitators of opportunities for learning, growth, and performance elevation in all spheres of life. However, this implies that they must assume this role from a perspective of help and support in which educational guidance is placed as the structuring axis of all their professional pedagogical activity. This explains why universities around the world not only have student guidance and counseling services or develop financial aid or psychological support programs but also include the training of university teachers in educational guidance as a requirement of the first order to ensure the quality of academic, research, job training, pre-professional and linking processes with society (Sánchez et al., 2019). Indeed, there is a wide field of reflections and proposals that point to the necessary link between educational guidance and the professional activity of the university teacher, the school, and other educational agents (Baker et al., 2021; Geesa et al., 2022; Hays, 2020).

There is consensus that today, a university professor cannot cling to the traditional classroom in which his or her function of transmitting knowledge recognizes him or her as the protagonist of the process. On the one hand, the advances in Pedagogy and Didactics of Higher Education have marked a necessary turn in the conception of learning at the university, where there is a predominant tendency to promote processes focused on collaborative work, research, and the construction of knowledge generated from the confrontation of theory and practice. On the other hand, there is the impact of information and communications technology, which became a key element in maintaining training activities during the pandemic, with results that lay the foundations for expanding and sustaining individualized education projects and, at the same time, greater coverage.

Within this framework, the perspective of the university professor as an educational counselor has been resized while opening up to the possibility of being an expert mediator in academic learning processes, research activity, and pre-professional practices or distance education programs of university teachers. This transformation broadened the perception of so many university professors about their role as an educational counselor since, in order to ensure the previous conditions, they had to leave a positive influence in the affective-motivational area and, in the same way, stimulate the process of self-knowledge, self-valuation, and self-realization as pillars to face the challenges of the national and global social project in which they live and work throughout their lives.

The systematization of more than three decades of the perspective of educational guidance in the university premises of Ecuador not only unfolded the vision and mission of the teacher in its recognized academic function but also dimensioned its participation in the individualized attention of these in the activities developed by the departments of student counseling and university welfare (Ormaza-Mejía, 2019). The academic regime legitimized the dual character of the teacher as academic and educator, although the preparation for the latter task was subordinated to the former, and the teachers understood in very different ways what it was all about.

What is certain is that, in recent years, progress was made in the possibilities of adequately preparing university teachers as tutors and educational counselors, a situation that was consolidated during the pandemic period when, in order to ensure the online learning process, the demands for counseling and psychological support for students adjusted to the new conditions increased. In recent years, positive and negative experiences have been recorded in this regard, mainly in attention to a certain group of competencies and performances demanded that are attached to the rationality of the activities performed. Therefore, other authors and currents identify that educational guidance is an area of little expertise for a non-specialist teacher and, therefore, this tends to be a specialized activity and proper of psychologists or other specialists in guidance rather than a function or group of tasks of the university teacher (Hage et al., 2020; Sampson et al., 2020; Pérez, 2022; Pérez et al., 2021; Poza-Vilches et al., 2019).

This alternative conception, although clearly necessary, also involves framing a system of training needs associated with the demands and possibilities of university teachers. Although more than two decades ago, the analysis of the psycho-pedagogical conceptions that support human development, the learning process, and the

direction of the professional's training process -especially around diagnosis-assessment and the management of different educational situations that coexist in university classrooms- did not constitute for a long time a topic for university teachers and even less became a priority for continuous training.

Studies carried out on the subject reveal that university teachers recognize their responsibility and commitment to the integral formation of students, while at the same time, they expose the deficiencies related to the foundations of this aspiration. Aspects related to knowledge, professional skills, or expected performances usually place the teacher in an unsustainable position by generating time and procedural load in all spheres of their performance in the face of objectives that go beyond what they recognize as their object or the limits of their preparation (Pérez, 2022; Pérez et al., 2023). In this regard, this state of teachers' representation exposes the fractures in the conceptions of their pedagogical activity and the relationships that this establishes with guidance; hence, it is necessary to include the subject in all its complexity as part of the processes of lifelong learning.

Previous research showed, preliminarily, that the main theoretical currents that support the alternatives and approaches related to the continuing education of Ecuadorian university teachers do not assume educational guidance as an unavoidable discipline. This finding highlighted the relevance of the contradiction detected since a clear arrangement of contents in the programs is not implicitly or explicitly appreciated, which would demand historical analysis, a general theory of guidance, and its methodological-practical foundation (Sánchez et al., 2022).

In addition, this analysis revealed a fundamental lack, perhaps the articulating axis between demands and real possibilities of the teacher to exercise the integral practice of educational guidance: the epistemological foundations of his or her role. As previously mentioned, this state expresses the contradiction between discourses, educational policies, and the efforts dedicated to the preparation of university teachers to exercise their guidance action in a sustained manner, as required by the new pedagogical models and political discourses. Therefore, it is assumed that the integral formation of the student is not a mechanical result of the teaching action, but that the achievement, from the teaching role, supposes a preparation that transcends the didactic and pedagogical aspects, that is, the conscious and sustained guiding action (Pérez, 2022; Pérez et al., 2021; Pérez-Gamboa et al., 2023).

In order to verify the presence of the contradiction detected in other contexts, related articles and papers were reviewed. Special attention was paid to the contributions defended in the last editions of the Pedagogy and University event, in which the participation of colleagues from Spain, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Cuba was identified. The analysis of these proposals made it possible to detect inconsistencies in relation to university policies and the way in which continuing education was organized, fundamentally marked by the fact that they did not encourage teachers to carry out guiding practices in university processes (Rojas, 2021).

In general, the systematization made it possible to identify as unpostponable the integration of the teacher's performance to the orientation carried out in the university; hence, he/she must be prepared to collaborate with the structures created for that purpose. It is considered then that it is part of their professional responsibility to assist students in those processes in which they require help, information or any other form of support. Although studies reviewed in the Latin American and world context coincide with the ideas presented above, the proposals aimed at offering the bases already mentioned and required to structure the continuing education of university faculty were found to be insufficient.

Due to the ramifications of the contradiction mentioned above and the associated shortcomings, organized efforts were devoted to the study of educational orientation as the content of improvement programs, training, or other forms of training aimed at preparing the university professor. As a result, a project was designed with groups of professors from different universities, focusing on pandemic and post-pandemic conditions (2020-2022).

From this initial diagnosis, it was possible to begin to establish the flaws in the continuing education of university teachers in order to achieve the optimum level of performance in the framework of the orientation action within the institution. These failures were highlighted when it was confirmed that the educational policies of this educational level clearly establish the guidance role of the faculty.

The systematization developed in the last five years allowed to assess, with those involved, the initial conceptions that were defended as part of the doctoral thesis in 2018 of the first author and to adjust from practical experience a proposal built and adapted to the needs of university teachers in Ecuador. Public and private universities were taken into account; full-time, contracted, and part-time professors, since it was intended to join criteria to conform a proposal more adjusted to the demands of Higher Education in the national and Latin American present time. The design of the process and the main results are reported below.

METHODOLOGY

Approach and design

The research was conducted with a mixed approach focused on understanding the participants' experiences, the researcher as the main instrument for data collection and analysis, as well as an inductive orientation. Therefore, the study was qualitative, with the quantitative embedded in the main design and based on frequency distribution, with special emphasis on similar study designs, in order to detect strengths and weaknesses in the methodological approach (Håkansson et al., 2024; Kuivila et al., 2020; Matsumoto-Royo et al., 2021; Mlambo et al., 2021).

The scope was descriptive and anchored on previous precedents, so it was necessary to triangulate sources and the analyses of the team of authors; the organization of data by contexts; the contrast with the state of the art in the international literature, and the main trends, in continuing education and lifelong learning; as well as the thematic and integrative analysis to achieve the synthesis of the main findings as presented in this text. These procedures made it possible to implement the study in several universities based on online interviews, a mixed questionnaire, and the elaboration of several databases that were subsequently curated. Their elaboration was based on a careful study of the basic aspects of data organization in qualitative and mixed research (Alam, 2021; Bouncken et al., 2021; Busetto et al., 2020; McLeod & O'Connor, 2021).

Data collection and key stakeholders

Among the empirical methods and techniques, observation, questionnaire, focus group and interview were used, as already mentioned. These resources made it possible to have information available at different moments of the process to identify the needs and potentialities of university teacher training in educational guidance in Ecuador.

Twenty-seven teachers from the Technical University of Babahoyo (UTB), 25 from the Autonomous University of the Andes (UNIANDES), 11 from the Metropolitan University of Ecuador, and 32 from other university centers and institutes in Guayas and Los Ríos were included. The dosing was carried out as an online call to which they responded voluntarily. On the other hand, 29 teachers participated in the discussion groups since they are part of the teaching groups in which the first two authors work.

In particular, the discussion group had special relevance in this type of study to the extent that it favored the processes of discussion, approval, and feedback of the theoretical and practical ideas of the proposal. Also, the assessment of teachers, managers, and other specialists linked to the practice was simultaneously incorporated, which jointly favored the elaboration of the proposal. The proposal was closed by incorporating the criteria of the third author; a strategy designed to temper possible biases and qualify the results (Farquhar et al., 2020; Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Natow, 2020), this from the foundations of university management.

Data analysis

The analysis was produced in three times and aimed to achieve a high standard of reliability while maintaining a flexible process (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Lester et al., 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020; Pratt et al., 2022). The protocol was developed from the review conducted of research with similar proposals or the guidelines offered by specialized studies (Campbell et al., 2021; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Lindgren et al., 2020; Lochmiller, 2021).

First, the data were organized by technique and context, which allowed for the transcription of the interviews and their initial analysis based on superficial reading and note-taking. Second, a coding system was established to identify the main trends and categories within the texts.

Thirdly, the data from the discussion groups were integrated into those already elaborated, explored in the light of the code-category system, and triangulated in terms of context, the role of the key participants, and the imprint of the researchers' discussion. From this third moment on, the information was processed and sufficient to elaborate the guidelines presented below.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to begin the presentation of the most relevant findings, it is necessary to establish a synthesis of the main results of the initial diagnosis, which were contrasted with previous experiences. These results demonstrate the limited progress achieved and the disruptive influence of the pandemic. The main lines recognized in the data can be observed below:

- A rupture between objectives, didactic contents, and methods was appreciated in the programs reviewed, which did not favor the articulation of the teaching of educational guidance in a thematic way. This shortcoming extended to the methodological aspects of the process and the peculiarities of guidance practice at the university.
- Interviews with key participants revealed a clear lack of knowledge, frequently expressed and projected as a rejection of the qualities, principles, and functions of educational guidance, when associated with the pedagogical practice of the faculty.
- Group devices and other interactive spaces were characterized by the lack of knowledge, the poverty of alternatives and proposals, as well as the insufficient didactic transposition of what is known about educational guidance, even among specialists.
- In the course of the participant and non-participant observation in different modalities of academic and pedagogical activity, the presence of behaviors associated with the traditional role (mostly instructive) of the teaching staff was evidenced.
- In the course of the participant and non-participant observation in different modalities of academic and pedagogical activity, it became evident that teachers do not perceive themselves as counselors, nor do they manage to establish the foundations of their mediating action; hence, they do not meet the expectations about their counseling role.
- The pandemic conditions, especially the country's complex general state, displaced vital concerns towards other spheres, which had repercussions on the prioritization of the instructive aspects of the university process.
- Due to the transition to hybrid or virtual education models, professors had to abide by new guidelines, be trained in the use of new technologies and adapt their teaching processes to these environments, and this affected the possibility of suggesting and implementing alternatives aimed at inserting educational orientation as a content of lifelong learning.

Without abandoning the theoretical starting position, it was considered convenient to assess the conceptions and implications for university teachers in Ecuador to include educational guidance as a training content in educational guidance. In this sense, a systematization and triangulation exercise of empirical methods and techniques was promoted, whose results allowed the discovery of teachers' conceptions in this regard.

In this sense, it can be seen that the university teachers interviewed explicitly recognize the need for guidance in Higher Education (87%). However, they consider it as a professional activity linked to the assistance and help to students who present limitations in meeting the requirements and lack possibilities for access and continuity in academic studies, which highlights a conception marked by didactic and remedial aspects, a fact that coincided with the findings of previous studies.

Likewise, it is frequent that educational guidance is not valued as a type of activity, but as a knowledge implicit in the academic function, especially of the teacher, linked to scientific tutoring and to the didactic function of guidance for study. This shows the division of the guidance action in different roles, processes, or disciplines without an integral conceptualization, as Pérez (2022) warns.

Only 30 teachers consider the specificity of educational guidance as a type of activity that corresponds to their role but directed to the subjects they teach. On the other hand, 22 point out the possibilities of becoming a specific activity of the teacher but do not consider it to be specialized since they insist that there are specialists psychologists, and counselors, both those who are part of the Department of Student Welfare or have the status of teachers of the Psychology and Education career in the selected universities. The teachers who participated in the study legitimize the mediating character in the face of conflict and its management.

In this order, there is a declared intention to fulfill the ideas about the challenge of preparation as an "educational counselor", which is defined as the ability to exercise the functions associated with mediation and the promotion of human welfare. At this point, it is necessary to accept the challenge that the university teacher, under any circumstance, should have the opportunity to appropriate a set of strategies (of help, of support), which become resources for his integral formative activity in the process of formation and development of the personality of the students. Therefore, he/she has to receive basic training in collaborative work with other professionals to achieve the objectives, deploy the value of methods and educational tasks.

University teachers assume that educational guidance, conceived as part of their support to the exercise of their functions, should be included in part of the content of the continuing education of university teachers (93%). These data could explain the tendency to situate the needs in the subject, particularly in matters such as the knowledge

with which to face the typical demands of the developmental stages in which the students find themselves (89%) and to elaborate the conditions to favor autonomous learning and the use of metacognitive resources (91%). They also noted the importance of preparing themselves to understand the synergies between environmental conditions, interpersonal relationships, and learning at university (92%).

They also considered it a priority to receive continuous training to promote inclusion, solidarity, and equity (90%); gender equality (72%); to promote active citizenship (93%); to encourage and support the participation of people in the self-management of students' socio-emotional development (87%). In addition, very much in line with the context of the research, 96% demanded training to guide learning strategies in virtual environments and through the integration of ICTs.

Indeed, the results highlight the notion that university teachers should be prepared to face a process of psychological and pedagogical mediation that allows them, through the use of educational guidance resources, to help or facilitate the analysis and decision-making about how to overcome conflicts. This type of knowledge was also identified as a personal need (88%).

Thus, the individual development of students and their own development is a topic of interest to be included in the continuing education of university teachers; something that consolidates the idea that new training needs always appear throughout life. Therefore, teachers are concerned not only about their professional training but also about developing their values and possibilities to understand and transform the reality in which they live and work with the knowledge they have acquired.

This explains why, when selecting how they wish to receive continuous training in educational guidance, they distinguish practical forms that allow them to outline their performance as an enabler, especially in the academic field (72%). Also noteworthy are the activities of linkage with society (68%) since it is recognized that these are areas that have begun to have greater significance in Higher Education. As weaknesses, it was identified that they have norms and regulations, but they do not master the methodology to facilitate compliance and the role of the guidance teacher in the university.

These results point to the fact that the teachers are aware of the psycho-pedagogical and psycho-educational rationality of the function of the guidance teacher, and by identifying the most complex areas of knowledge, they foresee the requirements established for the purpose of educating the personality of the students, aspects that go beyond the purely didactic, as already mentioned. Therefore, it is presumable that achieving the objective of preparing them passes the design of guidance actions based on the understanding of human development, the role of teaching-learning processes, and the theoretical and practical guidance models. In this sense, aspects related to methodologies for the development of communication skills, conflict management, and dialogic performance or the stimulation of flattened, empathic, and transforming relationships are necessary (Jobling & Alberti, 2022; Ridley et al., 2021).

In summary, the results presented above become an argument for the validity of the general requirements that the authors have identified as a dynamizing element in the treatment of educational guidance as a content of continuing teacher and university education:

1. To incorporate theories on human development with a biopsychosocial and interdisciplinary approach.
2. To facilitate the study of psycho-pedagogical diagnostic techniques, their relationship with the teaching-learning process and the forms that the educational guidance action can take.
3. To approach the theoretical-practical aspects of the models of educational guidance, the ways for their adaptation and application in the university context.
4. To integrate the fundamentals of lifelong learning and lifelong education as a way to provide students with resources for their development inside and outside the university, as well as in the rest of their life trajectory.

These requirements outline the organizational and methodological aspects that, as a collective construction, were produced from the data processing, the researchers' analytical action, and the key participants' feelings. Thus, it was considered that, in the selection, organization, and methodological sequencing of the university teacher's continuing education, educational orientation should be established as the articulating axis of the instructional and educational activity. As a higher level of integration, decision-making must be guaranteed to respond to this process's didactics. For this reason, the diagnosis of teachers' needs is a basic aspect because it must be understood as an expression of necessary knowledge in their personal and professional development.

In this sense, the determination of the content should assume as a reference the psycho-pedagogical rationality of the formative process in universities, which means ensuring that the teacher has a comprehensive mastery of theoretical, methodological, and practical aspects of educational guidance but in direct relation to the teaching practice. The main challenge is presumed to be the necessary coordination to achieve involvement in specific educational guidance activities associated with academic development, research, pre-professional work, and projects linked to society. These are essential spaces for diagnosing and guiding university students in their personal and professional development.

In this same order, the internal and coordinated management of the processes must ensure the conditions of the process to the extent that the pedagogical and didactic decisions are adjusted to the personal and professional characteristics of the teachers. To this end, priority should be given to efforts to stimulate processes of sensitization and awareness of the social and personal determinants that influence the degree of involvement of individuals in training activities. Therefore, it would be pertinent to expand access opportunities in viable and personalized alternatives that transform the teacher into a professional responsible for his or her continuous training in the subject and according to the emerging demands of his or her own professional pedagogical activity.

From the discussions developed with teachers, managers of the process, and other key participants, the idea of not underestimating the specialized knowledge that some teachers possess is maintained, however, it is insisted that the possibility of training calls being adjusted to the characteristics of these teachers should be considered. This, especially in function of common problems and in formal or informal spaces, involved in educational guidance actions.

After methodological meetings between specialists in university management, teachers, work groups, and volunteers themselves, alternatives can be included in the proposals, giving them the freshness and dynamism needed to learn how to carry out educational guidance. This dimension, born from the joint elaboration of devices for the transformation of the university, does not exclude activities related to student information and guidance, nor does it supplant the actions of psychologists and accredited educational counselors; something that Pérez (2022) and Pérez et al. (2023) call “professional educational counselor” and recommend that it be integrated into the functioning of other figures in charge of the guidance action in the university context.

Similarly, the teachers who participated in the research became echoes of the needs they share. Novice and more experienced teachers (12 teachers with more than 15 years in higher education) state that they find it complex to use the above premises, as well as to apply interactive strategies that subject to scrutiny the experiences of some and the perspectives with which others can assess and recommend the teaching performance. In this regard, they recognize that this type of activities opens the possibility of contributing to the understanding of the different situations that university teachers face today, which were not trained to be incorporated into practice and are already part of the teaching performance standards.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that the continuing education of university professors is a contextualized process, which responds to internal, local scenarios, but also to the currents of the scientific, academic and social mainstream worldwide. As part of its mission, higher education must ensure that this process is concatenated with the demands of the development of science and technology, its subjects and the social demands to be met.

These demands require the incorporation of educational guidance as content for the performance profile of university teachers. Consequently, the organization of continuing education should aim to include guidance practices in the professional-pedagogical activity and address the emerging educational situations that arise in practice.

University teachers in Ecuador recognize the importance of educational guidance and their responsibility as a facilitating guide for learning in the university context. However, it is evident that there are limitations in the conceptions they have about the treatment of educational guidance topics in continuing education. Although educational guidance is identified as the basis of the university teacher’s activity in the political and theoretical discourse that sustains the academic regime of university education, projects that prioritize this need have not yet been implemented.

In this framework, the reflections and practical experiences initiated by the authors in recent years confirm the needs and possibilities that the higher education system in Ecuador has to respond to the demands of transforming the university teacher into a guide capable of acting as a guide, mediator, facilitator, and stimulator of the integral development of students. It is expected that these changes in the profile will enhance aspects that will allow

overcoming the limitations in the integration of the pedagogical-professional activity of educational guidance of the teacher, with respect to the specialized intervention promoted by universities in fulfillment of their social responsibility.

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