The quality assurance: a strategic imperative in higher education*

The growing expansion and diversification of the courses in the field of higher education, coupled with the internationalization and globalization of education space make the challenge of quality assurance of institutions an imperative of tertiary education systems. This requirement becomes even more indispensable to take into account the large number of changes and social, political and economic demands that currently exist in the knowledge society. Indeed, the quality assessment is a crucial prerequisite for higher education institutions due to a number of reasons outlined below¹:

- **Increased demand and diversity of students**: Nowadays, in higher education institutions are not only entering in members of the most privileged socioeconomic groups, but also a wide variety of people in terms of age, entry behaviors, dedication, interests and aspirations. Consequently, it requires a greater diversification of educational provision in both, horizontal and vertical level in a context of continuing education.

- **New institutions and new scholars**: due to the increased demand, the newest and emerging higher education institutions have resorted to scholars with fewer qualifications in training and experience. This practice is joined by modalities of partial hiring, which can hardly guarantee the quality of the training.

- **Incomplete and asymmetric information**: since higher education institutions operate in imperfect markets, users of the system do not have sufficient information to help them make the best decisions. Indeed, the institutions have information that users do not have, and the most common mean of communication is advertising, with the corresponding cognitive bias that this implies.

- **Internationalization of the labor market**: the focus on quality is born from different actors within the country and beyond national borders. This owing to the increasing flows of supply and demand of professionals in global markets, situation to which the internationalization of own higher education is added.

- **Scarcity of public resources and accountability**: different sectors of society compete for scarce resources, which forces to account for the funds received to assess the relevance of financing granted to different types of institutions.

The globalization of higher education requires the availability of a degree system that responds to a higher training and that provides graduates with the skills that enable them to be successfully inserted not only in the local or national labor market but also in international markets. Furthermore, evaluation contributes to regional integration and exchange, international cooperation of programs and educational projects.

In this context, the assessment of quality in higher education can be defined as the process of gathering, quantify and systematically use information in the perspective to judge the effectiveness of training and curriculum relevance of a higher education institution as a whole or in its educational programs.

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This involves a review of the core activities of a higher education institution, including qualitative and quantitative evidence of educational activities and products of scientific research.

Therefore, quality assurance is a generic term used to describe a set of mechanisms that aim to control quality assurance and quality promotion; these mechanisms work in a wide variety of production contexts and organizations, including higher or tertiary education.

In this framework, the quality assurance of an institution consists in provide assurance of compliance with acceptable thresholds, both in inputs and in processes and results. Has to be added to this conceptual notion the systematic concern about the preservation and improvement of the quality achieved, generating the cycles of continuous improvement. Thus, quality assurance is based on the policies, stances, actions and procedures needed to ensure that the quality in higher education institutions will be maintained and will be enhanced.

Indeed, the quality assurance is the activity that achieves and maintains a satisfactory level in the organization’s work. Such satisfactory threshold is achieved through different mechanisms and systems and, therefore, involves compliance and improving standards; in order to align the educational needs of students, employers and government entities.

Although these requirements seem easily understandable and bearable, the truth is that the evidence shows that in different parts of the world the quality assurance is an important flaw in many higher education institutions.

For example, in the Chilean case of the 55 autonomous universities in the country there are 43 who have accomplished to establish and prove the existence of policies and mechanisms for quality assurance, while the other 12 have failed to establish this minimum level of compliance. Certainly, there are a significant proportion of institutions of higher education that do not demonstrate a sufficient level of quality assurance.

As a consequence, quality assurance is a strategic imperative for higher education institutions, because thus can respond to increased demand given by academically disadvantaged students; which often turn to new academic institutions with less experience in a context of asymmetric information, and in the frame of increasing internationalization which creates problems in the long term.