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Has the quality of teaching and learning processes improved as a result of the implementation of quality assurance coordinated by the state?

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ABSTRACT

Faced with the rapid pace of knowledge expansion, higher education institutions are challenged to raise the efficacy of student education, overcoming the traditionally rigid teaching-centred approach, and shifting the focus instead towards learning, while preparing competent professionals who are able to self-manage knowledge. This paper outlines the impact that quality assurance processes have had on teaching and learning processes from the perspectives of their main stakeholders: students, teachers and academic authorities. The study was carried out in three private higher education institutions of Argentina identified as having introduced certain changes focusing on quality in the education process. Arguably, a higher degree of empowerment of institutional authorities has been noted regarding teaching management and greater attention is being paid to teaching modes; however, the paper concludes that it is still early to ascertain the direct impact that these transformations will have on learning outcomes.

Framing of the study

In 1995, the Higher Education Law of Argentina (24,571) was enacted, introducing the quality assurance processes that higher education institutions are required to comply with and creating the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (*Comisión Nacional de Educación y Acreditación Universitaria*, CONEAU) as the oversight body for said processes.

CONEAU is a decentralised agency within the sphere of the Ministry of Education and Sports of Argentina, whose main roles are:

(1) Giving higher education institutions their licence to operate (licensure).

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    (2) Granting accreditation for study programmes (accreditation).

    (3) Auditing higher education institutions to promote the improvement of educational quality (institutional assessment).

For 20 years following the creation of CONEAU, higher education institutions have gone through various processes of quality assurance.

Licensure

The typology of higher education institutions recognised by Higher Education Law No. 24,521 emerges from a combination of various aspects, considering both their institutional origin (state, private, provincial) and the scope of disciplines (universities and university institutes, depending on whether they cover a variety of unrelated disciplines or focus their academic offering on a single discipline area). All higher education institutions access licensure through an evaluation process carried out by CONEAU.

State institutions undergo three licensure instances: creation, organisation and standardisation. Quality assurance is mandatory in the last two stages.

Private institutions (created for the most part simultaneously with the establishment of CONEAU) must go through a process of assessment, comprising a preliminary approval of the institutional programme as the initial step for creation, and subsequently a definitive authorisation and establishment as autonomous universities. During the term allotted for their preliminary operation, CONEAU issues annual reports regarding their academic level and the degree of fulfilment of their objectives and action plan. That is, privately managed higher education institutions are created and developed under the tutelage of the state as an evaluating agent. Six years after their creation, these universities may apply for definitive authorisation, for which purpose they must go through a process of institutional evaluation (comprising a self-assessment stage and a peer-review or external evaluation). It should be noted that private-sector higher education institutions do not receive any public funding.

Provincial higher education institutions that seek national validity for their degrees must go through similar processes as private-sector higher education institutions.

Accreditation

The Argentine state requires the periodic accreditation of certain undergraduate degree programmes that meet the criteria defined by section 43 of the Higher Education Law and of all graduate programmes. In both cases, CONEAU is the accrediting body and accreditation standards are set by the Ministry of Education and Sports, in consultation with the University Council (CU).[1] The degrees covered

by the provisions of article 43 of the Law relate to the practice of certain professions that involve the health, safety, rights, goods or education of citizens.

Institutional assessment

In accordance with Higher Education Law article 44, higher education institutions must ensure internal institutional assessment instances and carry out a self-assessment every six years that is supplemented by an external peer review conducted by CONEAU. The recommendations for improvement arising from this evaluation are made publicly available.

   This article examines the perceptions of academic authorities, academics (faculty) and students regarding the effects that external quality assurance mechanisms have on the management and development of teaching and learning processes. Additionally, it analyses the reference frameworks associated with the changes introduced in educational quality. The subjects of study are three Argentine private universities that over the past three years have gone through an institutional assessment process and through two undergraduate programme accreditation processes.

The challenges facing higher education

Social transformations that affect higher education have impacted on the structuring and development of institutions, requiring a critical review as well as an effort of re-articulation with the productive sector (Brunner & Uribe, 2007; Rama, 2014). The university management model needs to become more flexible if it is to meet the needs of the labour market more effectively. The rapid pace of innovation in the productive sector requires training professionals beyond specific technical skills, enabling them to learn new capabilities in unpredictable work environments and to perform successfully as members of collaborative teams. Higher education institutions are expected to train professionals using a competency-driven model, so that they will be empowered to act in indeterminate and global contexts, overcoming the model of technical training that prepares individuals for practicing the profession in predictable and determinate contexts. However, the slow pace of educational change has deepened the crisis of social confidence in the university system as a space for the training of competent professionals to act in a globalised society (UNESCO, 2004), whose economy is based on the production and management of new knowledge (OECD, 2012).

   Research on the views and strategies underlying the concept of learning in higher education students has demonstrated the prevalence of models centred on the assimilation of academic contents to the detriment of other models more focused on the development of skills to enable knowledge transfer and utilisation (Aparicio, 2007; Pozo & Perez Echeverría, 2009). Changes in the quality of teaching at the higher education level are not resolved with strategic planning

designed from the core structure of the institution in question but rather require a critical review of teaching conceptions and their formative practices (Kane *et al*., 2002; Diaz Barriga, 2006). The involvement of professors and students is instrumental in the assessment of educational quality (Newton, 2000; Dill, 2003; Harvey, 2008). Mårtensson *et al.* (2014) have pointed to the importance of considering the micro-cultures of institutions when it comes to driving change in teaching and learning processes. The authors emphasise there is an evident gap in the orientation attributed to expected changes in quality improvement, between the traditional organisation of quality assurance processes and the organisation that characterises academic life. While the formal organisation of said processes proposes changes towards the future, indicating strategies and actions for fulfilling them, the micro-academic cultures respond to a saga or tradition that identifies them and conditions their changes and developments.

As Clark noted (1983, p. 236), 'Much academic change is invisible (…) Developing thoughts as in research; transmitting thoughts, as in teaching; absorbing thoughts, as in learning—all are difficult to see and to evaluate directly at the time they occur'. In this regard, there has been a growing interest in the identification and dissemination of good practices found in real contexts of development, as an approach to promote strategies contributing to the improvement of educational quality at university level (Harvey & Newton, 2004; Zabalza Beraza, 2012).

As from 1990, quality in higher education has taken a strategic role in public policy-making in most countries around the world that have introduced quality assurance systems in their normative frameworks (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Dill, 2003; Newton, 2007; Stensaker, 2008). Indeed, quality assurance became a topic of international discussion and studies abound about the effects of said processes in the quality of higher education (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Dill, 2003; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Stensaker, 2008; Harvey & Williams, 2010). In a review of published research, Harvey and Newton (2004, p. 157) concluded that most impact-centred studies regard quality from the perspective of compliance and accountability; they focus on the effects that quality assurance processes have had on the management structures and internal processes but have said little about the identification of transformative experiences in students' learning.

While research indicates that authorities are paying increasing attention to the teaching function (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Stensaker, 2008; Zenteno & Lemaitre, 2012) few studies reveal any substantive evidence about changes in the learning process. In this regard, Zenteno and Lemaitre (2012), in a study comprising seven countries of Ibero-America (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Spain, Mexico and Portugal), surveyed the recognition by both students and professors of the improvements in study programmes, curriculum design and academic development, for both internal management and external evaluation at institutions.

Such an inquiry into the perceptions of the actors involved in managing and developing the educational process has led to an analysis of the changes they identify in the quality of teaching and learning processes.

Methodology

Type of approach

This is a qualitative study of a descriptive-evaluative nature, using the method of empirical research of case studies.

The study focused on three private universities of Argentina meeting the following eligibility criteria. They have completed at least one process of institutional assessment (self-assessment and external evaluation) and a process of degree programme accreditation over the past three years. They have varying sizes. The classification prepared by Del Bello *et al*. (2007) was used: large (10,000 or more students); medium (between 3000 and 9999 students) and small (up to 2999 students). They have provided assisted consent, giving access to key informants.

To survey the perceptions of management, faculty (academics) and students regarding the effects that external quality assurance mechanisms have on the management and development of teaching and learning processes, the following data collection techniques were used:

- in-depth interviews with institutional authorities;
- focus groups with professors;
- structured questionnaires with students.

The tools outlined in the study by Lemaitre and Zenteno (2007) entitled 'Educación Superior en Iberoamérica, Informe 2012'[2] (*Higher Education in Ibero-America, 2012 Report*) were used, and customised for the purposes of this research.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the university presidents and academic vice-presidents of the three higher education institutions under review, and with the directors of degree programmes that had undergone accreditation processes over the past three years. Focus groups were carried out separately for each study programme that applied for accreditation and included at least 10 professors of the relevant programme. Surveys were administered online to all active students in the degree programmes submitted to accreditation. Taking into account these criteria, overall 12 institutional presidents/vice-presidents, 78 professors and 207 students were interviewed (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of participants interviewed per university.

Case	Size	Senior management	Professors	Students
Case 1	Large	4	31	118
		University President, Academic Vice-President, Director of Psychology Programme, Director of Architecture Programme		
Case 2	Medium	4	22	47
		University President, Academic Vice-President, Director of Psychology Programme, Director of Architecture Programme		
Case 3	Small	4	25	42
		University President, Academic Vice-President, Director of Agronomy Programme, Director of Architecture		

Data analysis structure

The following dimensions were considered (included among data gathering tools provided by Zenteno and Lemaitre's study (2012)) to analyse the perceptions of the institutional actors interviewed:

- *Macro dimension, national quality assurance system:* information on the system, its institutionalisation and operation.
- *Mezzo dimension, institutional management:* institutionalisation of quality assurance mechanisms and development of information systems.
- *Micro dimension, teaching management*: changes introduced in the academic offering, syllabuses, student follow-up, the assessment of learning and teaching modes.

Micro dimension, teaching management

When questioned about the drivers for the evolution of the academic offering, university presidents explained its development by referring it to the articulation with the socio-productive sector and its innovation.

> The development of academic offerings should be informed by a socio-professional-productive view of the region. (University president, case study 2)

> The study programs should contribute to productive and social development and innovation. The offerings should be aligned with regional needs. (University president, case study 1)

Academic vice-presidents, programme directors and professors agreed that changes introduced in the study programmes are driven not only by accreditation-related procedures required by the state but also by internal institutional processes of curriculum review.

> While I believe that accreditations have influenced the modification of syllabuses, I also think that these curricular changes are more associated with our institution specific profile. (Vice-president, case study 2)

> Standards have undoubtedly affected the contents of the curriculum and changed the profile of the graduate. However, I believe that beyond these standards in our program, there is a reasonable articulation between the contents and the requirements of the labor market, and that is a driver of our program. (Study programme director, case study 1)

> In our case, accreditation of our study program had an impact on the curriculum, as we had to change the total duration to add pre-professional trainee hours and adjust the profile of the graduate based on the extension of the professional field. We have worked on the Curriculum Committee to conduct these adjustments to the current plan. (Focus group, case study 3)

Regarding the impact of quality assurance processes on the quality of teaching, the degree programme directors and professors agreed to highlight the increase in

physical and economic resources as a strength for the development of the teaching function.

> It is important to acknowledge the improvement in services and resources allocated to teaching. (Study programme director, case study 2)

> There was a significant improvement in the infrastructure, the library and the classroom equipment. (Study programme director, case study 3)

> It is fair to say that accreditation has enabled us to access greater budgetary resources which in turn has allowed us to strengthen research, carry out calls for proposals, and train professors. (Study programme director, case study 1)

> At our study program, we have seen a significant improvement in the resources we now have available to work with. As professors we now have more technology, because all classrooms are now equipped with projectors and computers. (Focus group, case study 1)

> In addition to projectors and computers, we now have access to databases and a better stock of books in the library, as well as up-to-date labs. (Focus group, case study 3)

In two of the universities, faculty training and evaluation were considered intrinsic elements of the institutional policy.

> At this university, professors are evaluated by students and management every year. Additionally, we hold regular meetings with professors and provide continued training to help improve teaching methods. (Focus group, case study 1)

> At our university, we have support staff who assist professors who wish to improve evaluation tools or innovate in how topics are presented and taught. We have two members of our support staff devoted to such tasks, and they also administer student surveys to receive their feedback about the institution. (Academic vice-president, case study 2)

On the learning process, degree programme directors agreed to emphasise the gradual progress they attributed to the convergence of quality assurance processes and institutional mechanisms for the follow-up of students' academic performance. Likewise, professors have underlined an improvement in learning, evidenced by the outcomes of tests and the project work conducted by students; though in one institution, the limitations that students bring from high-school education surfaced,

> Yes, we may claim that learning has improved. Today we see that this is materialized in written assessments and verbal productions…. Follow-up of low-performing students has improved with the use of tutoring. Furthermore, accreditation requirements lead to stronger focus on learning outcomes. (Focus group, case study 2)

> Student assessment mechanisms have improved considerably based on agreements we have built among professors, helping us to reach consensus in the criteria for assessment. For instance, we all include questions to solve, argue and analyze, and any closed questions require answers that should be justified. (Focus group, case study 1)

> The result of the learning process may have somewhat improved…we have worked on that at the degree program based on the accreditation, but the deterioration of high

school education involves certain gaps that newly admitted students bring along which are very hard to overcome. (Focus group, case study 2)

When asked about the changes caused in teaching management, most students mentioned that favourable changes in the curriculum, the teaching method and the learning quality are perceived (Table 2).

Changes introduced in the quality of teaching and learning processes

A survey of the perception of the stakeholders interviewed led to the identification, on the one hand, of changes in institutional management associated with teaching and, on the other, of changes in the development of the teaching and learning processes.

Changes in institutional management associated with teaching were mainly attributed to quality assurance processes promoted by the state. Such is the case of the perception of stronger leadership taken by institutional authorities in data management, through a strengthened array of work procedures and routines for reporting and follow-up of work plans. However, these changes in institutional management do not guarantee by themselves any quality improvement. In this regard, it is apparent that the development of a self-assessment culture is still at an early stage and, as perceived by participants, has not yet permeated to the entire higher institution, even though the existence of internal quality assurance mechanisms is acknowledged.

In turn, changes perceived in the development of teaching and learning processes are attributed to the convergence of external quality assurance mechanisms and institutional mechanisms.

As regards the curriculum, the respondents see that certain adjustments in programme curriculum were prompted by the need to bring it into line with the standards of the accreditation procedures; however, they admitted that the main changes in course syllabuses were driven by institutions to further customise degree programmes to the requirements of the productive sector and knowledge updating of the curriculum following the advances in the discipline. The most

Table 2. Survey results, 207 students, on the improvement of teaching and learning processes.

Aspect of the teaching-learning process evaluated	% Identifying progress
The curriculum of your study programme	50.2
Professors' teaching method	53.2
Diversity of practical environments to improve content comprehension	54.3
Active engagement of students in the classroom	73.7
Acquisition of oral and written communication, problem-solving and text analysis skills	66.6
Learning assessment mechanisms (examinations, practical projects, monographs, oral presentations)	64.4
Professor feedback on assessment outcomes	61.6
Use of technologies or other innovations in teaching to improve learning quality	56.6

Source: Surveys administered in 2016 to students in six study programmes that went through accreditation processes, in three private higher education institutions of Argentina.

relevant change in the teaching process involves the introduction of physical and technological elements that made classes more dynamic: a change attributed to the institutional impact of degree programme accreditations. Additionally, improvements were noted in the methodological strategies and student assessment in two of the higher education institutions that have professional staff for teaching support. Professors associated changes in learning with the academic dynamics: discussions in collegiate bodies, tutoring of low-performing students and the review of assessment models, among others.

Conclusions

The research outcomes indicate that there is agreement among stakeholders of the three higher education institutions under review regarding the relevance of quality assurance processes and their impact on the improvement of institutional management and teaching development. This appreciation positions quality assurance as one of the priorities on the institutional agenda and elevates to a higher standing the outlook of teaching and learning process improvements in higher education.

In support of the outcomes of other studies (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Stensaker, 2008; Zenteno & Lemaitre, 2012), the changes in institutional management associated with systematised data administration seem to have empowered academic authorities with more responsibility to lead and monitor the management of teaching. However, decision-making in academic policy and other aspects of the planning and management of changes in teaching do not prove enough to show improvements in the quality of the educational process. The fact that the culture of self-assessment has not yet become mainstream in the higher education institutions under review at all levels of institutional development would be a limiting factor for the effective assimilation of changes in academic life (Newton, 2000; Dill, 2003; Mårtensson *et al.*, 2014).

One finding of this research is that quality assurance processes, in particular study programme accreditations, have permeated institutions, leading to a higher quality of curricula, improved learning conditions with enhanced physical and technological resources in classrooms, and the revision of student assessment and follow-up mechanisms. All these changes identified by authorities, faculty and students were associated with internal quality assurance mechanisms that were systematised and improved as a result of external evaluation instances.

Furthermore, the evidence of changes introduced in the teaching and learning processes demonstrates a sustained shift from the traditional, teaching-centred model of education, towards learning-oriented activities and outcomes.

Another key finding is the express interest of higher institution presidents in defining and discussing the notion of educational quality jointly with the faculty of higher education institutions. In this regard, attention is drawn to the fact that quality assurance practices have raised awareness and accountability among higher education institution authorities regarding the orientation and tracking of

the quality of teaching processes, a matter that historically laid within the exclusive decision-making realm of faculty. Thus, the pedagogical dimension emerges with an increasingly leading role in a higher education system that has heretofore been largely removed from this perspective of analysis. The tracking of teaching practices in their real context, the pedagogical training of higher education professors, the promotion of good practices leading to students' autonomous learning, tutoring and mentoring for students in the education process and the assessment of the progress achieved, are only some of the items that must be part of the agenda of university debate, if the goal is to improve teaching and learning processes.

Notes

1. The University Council is made up by seven representatives of the Executive Committee of the National Inter-University Council (CIN), seven representatives from the Executive Committee of the Private University Presidents Council (CRUP), one representative from each of the seven Regional Councils of Higher Education Planning (CPRES) and one representative from the Federal Education Council (CFE). It is chaired by the Minister of Education.
2. The principal investigator, María José Lemaitre, has provided her assistant consent.

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