Changes in Academic Management and How They Relate to the Process of Institutional Assessment in Argentine Private Universities

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Abstract: This presentation is part of a research paper called *Quality assurance processes and organizational change in Argentine private universities.* This presentation addresses the changes implemented by universities with the aim to improve academic management quality. A review of research literature on the relationship between quality assurance processes and changes in the academic process does not reveal a consensus on a favorable impact on this dimension of analysis. The work performed by Lemaitre and Zenteno (2012) for CINDA points to the fact that changes introduced in the area of academic management are not exclusively driven by quality assurance initiatives. In this regard, research has identified both internal pressures within universities and external pressures to adjust educational processes to workforce demands.

This paper is based on three hypotheses in an attempt to explain the changes undertaken by universities faced with quality assurance processes:

(1) The challenges posed by the national and international context require Argentine universities to address a necessary functional and organizational transformation, in terms of both competitiveness and quality.

(2) Change in the academic quality of universities is the result of a trade-off between external changes and requirements, on the one hand, and the values, standards and practices resulting from institutional interactions, on the other.

(3) Universities uphold ritualized practices that can be modified whenever tensions affecting the achievement of the proposed objectives are felt.

In preparing this paper, a documentary analysis was made, including both self-assessment and external assessment reports for three universities that undertook the institutional assessment process in the 2001–2006 period, as well as semi-structured interviews with academic referents in each university.

Key words: institutional changes, assessment processes, higher education, educational quality

1. Conceptual Framework

For centuries and up to the present day, universities have been irreplaceable players when it comes to judging the quality of education and higher studies. Over the past decades, several reasons marked by a convergence of political, economic and sociocultural forces have driven the concern over university quality beyond the academic space.

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Even though higher education systems broadly depend on traditional academic self-regulation (Dill, 2003), a set of phenomena, including the massive spread and diversification of institutions and students; the relative decrease in public funding, and the need to meet the demands of the employment market have driven a strong expansion of quality assurance mechanisms by the States. Over the past two decades, this QA regulation has become a powerful political instrument in most countries around the world. For some critical authors, the introduction of the QA agenda in the sphere of higher education has been matched by cutbacks in higher education spending, based on extremely onerous processes (Watson & Taylor, 1998).

This "double command" on universities opens numerous questions, fundamentally, one that lies at the very heart of the new QA policy: Has university quality improved?

The effects of QA systems have raised profound debates:

• Some authors have argued that QA systems have no impact on deep changes in the development of higher education (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

• Others point at changes in the institutionalism, generation of decision-making information and the perception of a new role of the State in its relationship with institutions (2012, CINDA).

• Some studies conclude that the increase in quality as a response to QA mechanisms is blurry, because QA processes are only a piece in a puzzle (EUA, Loukkola, 2010).

When the analysis is limited to the effects of the assurance process on <u>educational quality</u>, results are even more diverse:

• Some believe that there has been an intensification of the debate on learning, the effective use of students' insights on the preparation of study programs, curricular reforms, higher standards in students' performance assessments and in the improvement of assessment instruments, innovation in study programs, and improvements in instructor programs, particularly, in teaching aspects (Baldwin, 1997; Silva et al., 1997; Brennan & Shah, 2000; Newton, 2000; McInnis & Marginson, 1994).

• Others think that the impact has been rather narrow (Horsburgh, 1999; Harvey, 2002) and has even caused such problems as bureaucratization and the weakening of the tradition of collegiate decision-making autonomy (Baldwin, 1997; Harvey & Newton, 2004).

All authors agree, however, that the effects cannot be considered in isolation from their contexts; that such processes should be understood as triggered by a combination of different factors, including quality assessment, and that it is risky to assume that QA systems exist in a vacuum. Their effectiveness and impact are independent neither from other developments nor from institutional contexts. Vroeijenstijn (1995) argues that, unlike the case of research assessment, in which there is an assessment tradition, the academic community had not generated analogous mechanisms to evaluate teaching and learning proposals until, precisely, the rise of QA systems that have become pervasive in the last decades.

However, it is of the essence to continue delving into the analysis, as it sheds light on the singularity and the rationale of the creation of QA systems and the advent of the State as the keeper and public certifier of the qualifications of education, in particular, faced with the expansion phenomenon.

These considerations lead to infer that the search of the possible effects of quality assurance should be carried out considering a diversity of simultaneous events occurring in the context and having an impact on different levels of the system and the organization. The Argentine university system has some singularities:

• In the first place, the dynamics of expansion of higher education in Argentina has unfolded in a cyclic context of growth and economic restriction, including both democratically elected administrations and coups, with

an impact on the expansion of the institutional platform and student enrollment. As an example, between 1976 and 1984, a period of high expansion in many countries around the world, student enrollment in Argentina plummeted, during one of the most violent dictatorships of our time.

• Secondly, the processes of evaluation and accreditation in Argentina started almost coincidentally with the large expansion of the private sector in university education. Through a national law, these processes became mandatory, periodic and diverse: accreditation of study programs, institutional assessment and evaluation of projects for new institutions and new study programs that are part of so-called accreditation-worthy programs, i.e., all postgraduate and undergraduate programs declared in the public interest.

• Finally, support by the state for the implementation of quality improvement commitments deriving from accreditation (corrective) processes is only reserved for the programs of state-run universities. Private universities do not receive funding to implement such changes.

These characteristics outline the parameters of this paper. It deals with the educational quality policies of three private universities created in the period of expansion/massification of the 90s, i.e., coincidentally with the emergence of a national policy of quality assurance.

This definition contributes to minimize certain effects:

• Limitations associated with the funding-quality relationship are clearly defined.

• Beyond the discussions arising around differences between conceptual QA models, in some way or other, in all Argentine university institutions different types of mechanisms converge in terms of nature and purpose.

The relationship between the QA system and the educational quality policies of new private universities, created concurrently with this system, is worth considering. With the aim to limit the analysis to the relationship with educational quality, the study is focused on the notions of quality at stake regarding faculty, a key engine to address the challenges and the necessary functional and organizational transformation required by the contexts, as it relates to both competitiveness and quality.

The new universities gradually expanded their faculty including academics and researchers from other universities and from the professional field. In this manner, the groups promoting the new universities started to converge, in the same space, with professors who were closely linked and identified with other universities, without easily giving up that identity. Additionally, in periods of expansion, it is to be expected that professors turn into a scarce resource, particularly in the light of the growing demands from the various disciplines, as well as those deriving from educational quality assessment processes.

2. Methodology

Answering the question **has educational quality of universities improved?** involves conducting a qualitative investigation of a descriptive-explanatory approach, as well as comparative studies (Neiman & Quaranta, 2006).

To understand the multiple cultural, social, political and economic factors that come into play, a *socio-historical approach of the context* is adopted, i.e., an *internalist approach* of the changes in the institutional project, and a *cultural-institutional approach* enabling an understanding of the university as a unit in which all stakeholders share a set of ritualized values and practices that can be modified when changing environmental circumstances are identified.

The *neo-institutionalism and contingency theories* are helpful to understand how the organizational environment influences the development and execution of changes and actions aimed at reaching university

quality. The former emphasizes the importance of the institutional environment and how the framework of rules, policies and state of the context can suppress objective contingencies, while the latter enables setting in motion best practices contingent on the particular situation, and anticipating the existence of changes in the context and their relationship with changes in universities. To that end, universities will be considered as to how they have reacted to specific circumstances, whether they have adapted to the contextual circumstances or whether actions have been taken on an uncertain grounds.

To categorize the practices, the following has been taken into account: the structuralist approach adopted by Nogueira & Brunner; 1999; the notions of change quality (Gonzalez & Galindo; 2004); degrees of change acceptance (Camous; 2007), and the type of culture prevailing in change (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

Finally, practices were classified in terms of a series of indicators directly linked with expansion processes, including the size and modes of offerings, enrollment, number of campuses, etc. In that respect, the type of supporting process or effort has also been considered, particularly in times of change. Thus, funding, the setting of formal standards and the positioning target have become relevant.

External assessment reports have been reviewed to describe universities, identify practices and changes, and analyze external assessment recommendations. In addition, an analysis is derived from interviews coming carried out to confirm the contents surveyed in the reports, observing whether there are any differences between formal arguments and statements made. Additionally, questions are raised on how the recommendations of external assessments have been considered.

3. Expansion, Objectives of University Creation and Quality Assurance Systems

University expansion in Argentina since the 90s has been double-sided: there has been an expansion of institutions and their practices, and of the assessment process and its practices. Having said that, certain traits typical of the expansion involved in the QA system structure have not been stress-free.

In the twenty years between 1989 and 2009, known as the **expansion period**, 66 university institutions (39 private, 27 state-run) gained official recognition status. With an aggregate enrollment of 30,764 students, at present they represent 18% of total university students, 57% of those students in state-run universities[1]. In the aggregate, they offer 1589 undergraduate programs (34% of the total undergraduate offer in the country), 53% of which are taught in state-run universities. An analysis of the background of those universities shows situations of continued expansion and diversification of disciplines and educational levels. A comparison of the "size" of institutions in terms of enrolled students shows that between 1999 and 2009, 43% of new universities grew in the number of enrolled students, becoming medium or large in size. At the same time, 40% of institutions created in the 90s have remained "small", which may be indicative of the fact that, during the period of expansion, certain "elite" institutions were created.[2]

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[1] University data 2012.

Total institutions: 115; State-run: 55 (including Universidad Autónoma de Entre Ríos, managed by the provincial government); Privately-run: 60 (including Flacso and Bologna universities). Source: SPU website, University institutions, http://portales.educacion.gov.ar/spu/sistema-universitario/listado-de-universidades-e-institutos/.

Enrolled students

Total: 1,718,507 enrolled students; State-run: 1,366,237 Privately-run: 352,270;

Source: SPU annual statistics. http://portales.educacion.gov.ar/spu/investigacion-y-estadisticas/anuarios/.

[2] Source: SPU website, University institutions, http://portales.educacion.gov.ar/spu/sistema-universitario /listado-de-universidades-e-institutos/.

Another noteworthy characteristic is institutional diversity. One of the ways in which diversity is noticed is through the "vision of the world" that characterizes the institutions. In this regard, institutions created in the 90s are diverse: there are confessional, business institutions, etc. A second trait is internationalization. Within institutions there is a campus of a foreign university and an institution that was created through an agreement among various Latin American nations. A third characteristic is derived from the type of territorial site they have: campus; campus and satellite venues for graduate programs; regional reach; venues distributed throughout the country; with campuses under construction; in several buildings, etc. As a result, all the political jurisdictions of the countries are covered with university presidents' offices, i.e., all Argentine provinces in this expansion stage have university headquarters. Additionally, university configuration becomes more complex in the jurisdictions due to the convergence of main venues, sub-venues, and classroom extensions.

A comparison of the three universities created in the 90s reveals that two of them were started from entities connected with the business world, one of them having a confessional profile, and devoted to postgraduate education (CASE A) and the other one being technical-professional (CASO B). These were groups interested in continued education in management, and within the framework of regulatory possibilities, they offered opportunities for continued education to professionals immersed in the complex tasks of companies. The third institution is very different: it was created from a widely recognized research center (CASE C).

The three cases have diverse institutional challenges: CASE A required the conversion of a postgraduate education space into a university; CASE B involved the conversion of a tertiary institution into a university institution; and CASE C involved the conversion of a research institute into a university. Another distinctive feature is the physical physiognomy. CASE A was established with two geographically disperse venues, and the start of a campus located 70 km away from a city where a venue exists; CASE B started with several buildings located in Buenos Aires City, and subsequently venues were established in the provinces. CASE C is exclusively based in Buenos Aires City.

The development of the first years of existence of the universities under review, in the sphere of the assessment effort, shows observations which for Cases A and B restrict expansion strategies, precisely in the light of limitations in the process of establishment and development of the critical mass of faculty, while CASE C does not have limitations in this aspect, but it is limited in terms of institutionalization and educator training.

3.1 Case A

External assessment concludes that ideas inherited from the original institution and new ones established upon the institutionalization of the university show coincidences between the notion of quality of the assessment team and achievements obtained by the institution: practices for the incorporation of full-time and renowned academic background faculty, faculty working environment and the institution's link with different types of organizations.

Raters point out that, even when ongoing, it is necessary to boost faculty training in research, inter-school communication, faculty exchange, faculty production, faculty training for the development of tutorships, the relationship with graduates in search of a better institutional integration, and faculty and student exchange programs with national and international universities.

On the other hand, regarding the research component, which outlines the strategy for the development of the academic body, the following has been markedly observed:

• At institutional definitions level (suprastructure): some limitations have been observed in the definition of

polices, standards and priorities.

• At actions and organization level (structure): some limitations have been pointed out in the formulation of projects from the academics groups, probably for lack of full-time dedication.

• At resources level (infrastructure) there have been some budget-related constraints indications and a noteworthy difference in budget allocation between units, thus deepening internal asymmetries.

Another limiting factor refers to faculty and interdisciplinary training and development:

• At institutional definitions level (suprastructure), there are limitations concerning the establishment of definitions all the way up to the design of a consistent and favorable institutional policy.

• At actions and organization level (structure), academic units have not been able to turn professional chair structures into subject departments, and there has not been any progress made in the development of a pedagogic program that favors faculty training.

Although the constraints shown correspond to specific academic development actions, the keenest observations relate precisely to those new characteristics incorporated at the time of institutionalization, especially linked to the harmful effects of the physical configuration of the University on academic activity and faculty members. The need for integration is viewed from different layers: articulation and prospective fertilization between different academic units; the conformation of the campus as a common place for all faculty members; the synergic leveraging of individual strengths; the formulation of an institutional guiding instrument.

3.2 Case B

The external assessment report shows coincidences between the value that the experience of training efficient-performance professionals in the management area represents for the institution and process management. However, the recommendations scope, its entity and coverage, shows deep inconsistencies between the quality notions of the assessment team and the institution's development possibilities. It is clear that for the latter the institution has not overcome its non-university status thus affecting the mandatory effort in the setup of faculty members that the expansion demands. The only exception is staff training and development endeavors.

Limitations appear at all development levels:

• At institutional definitions level (suprastructure): limitations have been noted regarding the definition of policies, standards and priorities, as well as the knowledge concerning available skills. Without these skills, the newly created degrees could be affected due to the lack of critical mass. It is therefore essential to promote critical mass through the definition of discipline and research training policies. Also, there is the need to establish an assessment policy.

• At actions and organization level (structure): there are a vast number of requirements that range from further education and integration to the provision of faculty hiring (and the procedures to implement it); research development, research support tools design and the strengthening of academic and research ties.

• At resources level (infrastructure): there is the need to generate a building plan in order to essentially verify its safety status; as well as the relevance regarding curricular needs.

However, the assessment team has expressed the sharpest limitations regarding the expansion policy, be it territorial or by means of new offerings. These limiting factors are present at all levels:

• At institutional definitions level (suprastructure): the assessment report considers both expansion alternatives and points out lack of planning, inconsistencies with the institutional project and key decision-making issues.

• At actions and organization level (structure): there are essential issues to consider: specific development

endeavors for the development of an academic community, the strengthening of the faculty, research implementation.

• At resource level (infrastructure): there are also general needs such as the requirement of budget and allocation procedures.

3.3 Case C

As in case C, there are clear discrepancies between the quality notions of the assessment team and the institution's development options, which would show that the institution has not overcome its research center status.

From this perspective, the expansion from research center into university would not assure the creation of an appropriate environment for teaching, in terms of the requirements that a university demands both in its formal aspects and in training and development. Most observations made correspond to the institutional definitions level (suprastrusture):

• Lack of action implementation as provisioned in the institutional project.

• Lack of application of the guidelines provisioned in the Bylaws.

• The formalization of activities in standards and procedures.

• Limiting factors linked to the education quality area such as the formulation of subject curricula, actions relative to initial cycles, and the creation of learning environments (languages), the student scholarship granting system.

Regarding the faculty, the limiting factor focuses on the conception of such a component, considering that, due to the nature of the institution, it is an academic body made up by researchers. The external assessment report recommends the revision of policies for the recruitment and certification criteria of faculty members.

There is also a recommendation for the resource level (infrastructure) to seek funding for the development of the new building.

Were there any changes in the institutions that have led to an improvement of the make up and development of faculty members?

Taking into consideration that a decade has gone by since the external assessments of cases A and B and a little more than a triennial for case C, in the analysis of other assessment reports (graduate and post graduate certification) and the results derived from interviews with the authorities of each one of the Institutions, there is evidence that the universities consolidated their faculty and generated several practices related to academic progress and development. Especially in cases A and B, these changes are directly related to the observations made after the external assessment.

The first distinct feature is the direct relationship between the changes implemented and the institution's characteristics and that of its original entity. The assessment of all three cases analyzed gave origin to recommendations based on minimum compliance with the Higher Education Act, that is, **further education and training development assurance, at faculty and interdisciplinary level.** The perception of these demands shifts according to the institution's culture. When dealing with institutions with a marked scientific reputation in specific knowledge areas, the attitude taken was essentially reactive to pedagogic demand. When the institution's reputation is a goal in itself, the practices for the incorporation and training of academic bodies are more diverse, encompass all three legal demands, and are subjected to assessment mechanisms.

A second feature, especially applicable to cases A and B, is the evident professionalization of academic

management areas, due to the need to broaden strategies and improve the conditions to attract teaching resources that were "scarce" in a university-expanding environment, as well as several other strategies to attain a balance between the institution's economic-financial sustainability and its expansion.

Despite the fact that it cannot be established that due to the effects of the external assessment recommendations the abovementioned changes have necessarily taken place, it is clear that cases A and B have gradually incorporated modifications related to said observations. As regards these modifications, interviewees state that although there have been large-scale changes; the philosophy of their universities has not been altered. Moreover, they present formulas that combine new demands with the original principles of their own institutional projects: the relevance of the professional component has survived, as well as the original geographic configuration, that is, in cases A and B no venues have been closed down.

Case C seems to deviate from recommendations, in terms of perception and the information gathered from other assessment reports.

How have universities and assessment systems "co-evolved"?

Preliminary results show that although the quality assurance system in Argentina dates back to 1996 and it has been made mandatory over a decade ago, it is still under development and consolidation. On the one hand, it has modified the nature of processes. From a "compliance/non-compliance" type of accreditation, the Assessment and Accreditation National Commission (CONEAU) had to develop operational formulas that mediated between the real status of degrees in the education system and the "mandatory requirement" specified in standards. In this sense, it was resolved to differentiate the accreditation validity between 3 and 6 years. Furthermore, quality improvement was highly stressed within the accreditation scope as a key process objective and as a result of this, *improvement plans* derived from self assessment became a priority. When these were deemed not adequate to comply with the standards, peer committees established accreditation requirements through which institutions had the opportunity to generate new improvement plans.

In turn, the incorporation of improvement plans to accreditation mechanisms led to the need for more and more complete and in depth diagnostic analysis, which exceeds the interpretation framework of standards and assessment guides. From the assessment task viewpoint, when there are objectives established by university institutions there is the need for experts to exercise their interpretation skills.

Under this light, the most relevant effect of both phenomena — improvement plans and accreditation — stems from the mobile border between assessment functions and its feedback.

In consolidated universities, which with the passing of years have originated rules and organization structures dictated by disciplines and professions, it could be pointed out that assessments, regardless of their different types, would tend to merge.

On the other hand, **in universities undergoing the consolidation stage —** not only institutional and academic but also identity-wise — the convergence of ways of judging the institutional role under different magnifying glasses according to the multiple disciplines would seem to have a significant impact. The direct relationship between the pressures derived from accreditation processes and the actions led forward by institutions is clear. Therefore, although these are preliminary results, it can be observed that, beyond the significant differences shown between the three universities under study, in all cases the recommendations derived from accreditation — recommendations from specific disciplines — have a relevant role when deciding institutional issues, at least as it relates to faculty.

In this regard, institutional decision-making makes up an arena where different organizational structures

articulate and collide, derived from the disciplinary cultures that constitute the different degrees in each university and that are accredited, independently, according to the rules of its discipline and professional fields.

Likewise, it would seem as if the strengthening of the faculty depended on its "reputation" and that it is directly linked to results obtained in discipline assessments (accreditation), which continue to be governed by research assessment rules.

Reputation, accreditation and internal debate arenas would seem to have become the driving formula for the progressive revision of precepts contained in institutional projects.

4. Conclusions

The results obtained so far ratify the initial hypotheses. In the case of private universities created simultaneously with the QA system, the challenges of the national and international context call for the necessary functional and organizational transformation, in terms of both competitiveness and quality. The conformation of faculty and the generation of institutional strategies for faculty development show "external" reputation as a relevant goal for universities. However, the sphere for reaching that reputation is sheltered in the traditional rules imposed by research: reputation and prestige continue to be governed by the rules of the historical gateways to the legitimation of science. Thus, the higher or lesser advances, or for that same matter, the higher or lesser effects, regarding the recommendations of external assessment can be influenced by the varying degrees of adherence to the rules of the various disciplines. This explains why the new institutions created in the 90s are in a process of institutional assessment that is still in combustion, i.e., it has not yet developed its own rules, and if it has, those rules have been re-signified in the light of the strength of the rules of the scientific world on the university agenda.

Change in university academic quality, specifically as to changes in faculty structuring and development policies, is the result of a **trade-off between external changes and requirements, and the values, standards and practices resulting from institutional interactions:**

• **When reputation is a core goal to be achieved by universities,** the practices designed to recruit and develop academics are more diverse with the aim, precisely, to encompass the three legal requirements of the assessment effort.

• Conversely, **when discipline reputation is an external requirement,** there is more reluctance to adopt the recommendations of educational quality requirements.

The same may be argued regarding the modification of ritualized practices. When an outcome or practice that lends an institution its external reputation occurs as a result of development, improvement and consolidation processes — even though it may have been subject to prior criticism for its non-existence or weakness — such outcome or practice is immediately merged with the original project of a university and singled out for the purposes of the QA process. But, when a minimum or optimum level of quality has not been reached for a certain aspect that would not, in principle, affect its reputation, failure to reach the recommended standard is met with "acceptance".

It would not be fair to analyze universities based on the QA constructs because the syntactic operations of these constructs are not enough to guarantee the semantic content of university processes. In this understanding, an analysis of the possible and potential effects of assurance systems requires comprehensive approaches, not only of the university changes around different notions of quality, but also of changes occurring inside the very heart of QA systems.

Finally, as regards the context in which universities operate, a perspective based on neo-institutional and contingency considerations has led us to a twofold interpretation of the relationship with the context:

• On the one hand, the changes have been justified by the rationality of a plan that supports the purpose of expansion, while the slowdown in the pace of expansion has been the result of adherence to the externally provided guidelines.

• On the other hand, based on the contributions of the contingency theory, a significant and positive relationship is observed between the weight of external discipline reputation and the attitude towards the demands deriving from external assessment.

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