

Quality assurance in Latin America

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Main features of Latin American HE

- Expansion of tertiary education systems
- Diversification of provision
- More heterogeneous student bodies
- New funding arrangements
- Increasing focus on accountability and performance

➤ **Increased diversity of higher education systems**



Quality and diversity

- Quality within a HE system is increasingly associated with diversity:
 - it enables HEIs to respond to a wider range of needs, from students and employers
 - it stimulates social and professional mobility
 - it provides opportunities for innovation

BUT ...

- Quality at the institutional level is still associated with traditional views



Challenges for quality

- Diversity reduces national trust in higher education: How to identify reliable provision in a diverse system?
- Diversity should translate into different definitions of quality: The zombie scene of higher education
- A diverse student population demands new curricula, new teaching practices, new methods for assessing learning: How to prepare academic staff for this new perspective?
- Increased and diversified access requires articulation: No education level is final. How to recognize prior learning in an effective and efficient way?

→ Governments see QA processes as a good solution

→ Regulation as 'soft power' or 'hard power'?



QA responses in Latin America

- Development of national systems
- Search for subregional arrangements
- Establishment of a regional network
- Links with a global network



Latin America: National QA systems

Established during the '90s

Promoted by government

High level of diversity in their development:

- Consolidated systems: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, El Salvador,
- Initial development or systems undergoing significant changes: Paraguay, Ecuador, Uruguay, Peru, Panamá
- No significant development: Bolivia, Venezuela

Some countries have one agency, with one or multiple purposes

Others have a wide range of organizations or mechanisms



Latin America: National QA systems

Tendency to complex systems, with a wide range of purposes:

- Licensing, evaluation of threshold standards, eligibility for accreditation (Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Costa Rica)
- Program accreditation
 - Voluntary (Costa Rica, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay)
 - Compulsory (Argentina, Chile)
- Authorization of accrediting agencies (México, Argentina, Chile)
- Institutional assessment or accreditation (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, México)
- Assessment of learning – exit examinations (Colombia, Brasil, Mexico)



Latin America: National QA systems

Of different ownership:

- Public, non governmental (Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Perú, Panamá)
- Governmental (Argentina, Bolivia, Brasil, Colombia, Cuba, México)
- Private (Chile, Panamá)
- Institutional (Bolivia, Costa Rica, Panamá, Perú, Uruguay)



Latin America: Sub regional arrangements

MERCOSUR – ARCU-SUR: an international agreement

- Shared quality standards, agreement on procedures; process conducted by national agencies.
- Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions and of the academic validity of degrees from accredited programs.

Central America

- Implementation of a region wide system of assessment for university programs, SICEVAES
- Central American Council for Accreditation, to promote QA processes in the region and validate accrediting agencies
- Specialized agencies at the regional level



Latin America: Establishment of a regional network

- Establishment of the Iberoamerican Network for QA in Higher Education, RIACES:
- Set up in Buenos Aires, en 2003
- Members in eighteen countries (QA agencies, university associations, governmental agencies) plus regional organizations
- Emphasis in the development of QA processes, support to new mechanisms, alliances with different organizations, harmonization of QA processes





Countries
with
members in
RIACES

Outcomes of RIACES

- Development of a regional community for QA
- Capacity building at different levels (existing and emerging agencies, HEIs, reviewers, policy makers)
- Support to the development of new QA mechanisms in several countries
- Harmonization of QA standards and procedures for undergraduate and graduate programs



Links with INQAAHE

- Dual membership – links and joint activities RIACES – INQAAHE
- RIACES supports the work of QA within the framework of regional priorities, in a shared cultural context
- INQAAHE supports a wider exchange, and provides opportunities to measure regional development against international experience
- Issues with different approaches: some strongly regional (recognition of degrees, harmonization of standards); some shared concerns across regions (distance education, training of reviewers); some global (TNE, accreditation mills)



Countries with membership in INQAAHE



AFTER ALL THIS EFFORT – WHAT HAPPENS AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL?

Report from an international study



Some basic facts about the study

- International project, involving 17 countries in LA and Europe
- Funded by the EU through the ALFA program
- Studied perceptions about the impact of QA on institutional management and teaching and learning, in seven countries:
Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Spain and Portugal
- Report on Latin American results



Dimensions to assess impact

- Higher education – system level
- Institutional management
- Teaching and learning process



QA mechanisms in participating countries

	México	Costa Rica	Colombia	Chile	Argentina
Assessment of threshold standards			X	X	X
Program accreditation	Voluntary	Voluntary	Voluntary	Voluntary Compulsory for Medicine and Teacher Ed.	Compulsory
Institutional assessment / accreditation	X		X	X	X
Exit examinations	X		X		
Authorization of private agencies	X			X	X

A short analysis by respondents

- Governmental authorities recognize the importance of QA, with little information about its features or potential.
- Institutional leaders have a positive view of internal QA, which they associate to their work rather than to public QA policies. They tend to associate QA with restrictions to innovation and institutional differentiation. Do not recognize significant influence on teaching and learning.
- Leaders at the faculty and program level, academic staff and students value highly the norms and practices of QA. They associate them to increased achievement of stated goals and to improvement in the quality of institutional functions.



Impact on the higher education system

- Institutionalized QA is recognized as a significant regulatory mechanism, which operates mostly through incentives (risk of unanticipated effects)
- Clear consensus on the overall positive impact of QA in the development of higher education
- Strong criticism to the use of homogeneous standards, applied to diverse HEI (this is voiced both by public and private HEIs)



Impact on the higher education system

- QA has highlighted the need for valid and reliable information systems, which must be tuned to the needs of different stakeholders. This is seen as a basic governmental responsibility.
- Risk of confusing information with publicity; need to regulate public information provided by HEI.



Institutional management

- Changes in organizational structure to institutionalize the design, control and planning of QA processes; concentration of information for decision making, which is increasingly in the hands of professional managers (who not always have an academic outlook)
- Increased presence of a managerial and burocratic approach to decision making, strongly criticized by mid level authorities and academic staff
- Increased recognition of teaching as a key function in universities, associated with the need to change evaluation and promotion mechanisms for academic staff



Institutional management⁽²⁾

- Improvement of information systems within HEIs, and increased usage for management and decision making
- Tension between the expectation that more information = improved management, and the workload associated to its provision and the maintenance of information systems
- Changes in criteria and practices for hiring academic staff (mostly formal, in response to the use of quality indicators)



Teaching and learning

- Significant changes in the formulation of expected learning outcomes, curricular design and updating of study plans.
- Improvement in the consideration of information on student progress and follow up of graduates; and of teaching strategies, methodologies and practices.
- Teaching is a key part of QA, highly valued by internal stakeholders. However, most QA agencies only focus on formal aspects and indicators, without paying attention to more substantive issues.



Teaching and learning (2)

- Improved information on progress and performance of students, which feeds into the management of teaching. This is seen as a direct result of demands for effectiveness associated to QA standards.
- Teaching strategies and practices: Direct influence from QA in basic changes (improved reading lists and materials, improved teaching resources) and indirect influence in the introduction of innovative practices (such as use of ICT, competency based practices, new teaching and assessment methods)



Final comments

- Latin American QA has been in place for almost two decades – it has developed to respond to the needs of national HE systems, with different and relevant models
- The overall view is that it has been effective, and has contributed significantly to the improvement and recognition of complex and diverse HE systems
- The growth and development of higher education, with increased enrollment and diversity, poses new challenges
- A study such as that reported here points to significant lessons, which can contribute to improvements at the national policy level, in HEIs and in QA agencies
- Higher education is a dynamic system – it cannot be served well by QA processes which are not ready to learn (and un-learn), adapt and adjust to the changing needs of students, institutions and society.



THANK YOU

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