

CINDA

*Impact of external quality assurance of higher  
education in Ibero-America:*

---

**Project: 'Quality Assurance: Public Policy and  
University Management'**

*Daniela Torre  
Gonzalo Zapata<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Authors: Daniela Torre, Executive Secretary, Consejo Nacional de Educación (CNE);  
Gonzalo Zapata, Academic, School of Education, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

## Table of Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b><i>Introduction</i></b> _____	<b>4</b>
	<b>1.1 QA models and processes in the Region</b> _____	<b>4</b>
	<b>1.2 Theoretical framework</b> _____	<b>5</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b><i>Methodological scope</i></b> _____	<b>8</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b><i>Results</i></b> _____	<b>11</b>
	<b>3.1. Macro dimension: Higher education and QA systems</b> _____	<b>11</b>
	3.1.1. QA institutionalization and operation .....	11
	3.1.2. Information about the higher education system .....	14
	3.1.3. Internationalization .....	16
	3.1.4. Role of the State .....	17
	3.1.5. Horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms.....	19
	3.1.6. QA and public opinion .....	19
	<b>3.2. Institutional management</b> _____	<b>21</b>
	3.2.1. Institutionalization of QA .....	21
	3.2.2. Development of institutional information systems.....	23
	3.2.3. Management, governance, and administration of HEIs and programs	24
	3.2.4. Institutional management of teaching .....	25
	3.2.5. Management of the academic/faculty body .....	26
	3.2.6. Administrative and financial management .....	27
	3.2.7. Participation of stakeholders in QA processes .....	27
	<b>3.3. Micro dimension: teaching-learning process</b> _____	<b>28</b>
	3.3.1. Graduation profiles, study plans, and curriculum.....	29
	3.3.2. Analysis of information about progression and achievement.....	31
	3.3.3. Assessment of learning .....	32
	3.3.4. Teaching strategies .....	33
<b>4.</b>	<b><i>Conclusions</i></b> _____ <i>¡Error! Marcador no definido.</i>	
	<b>In summary</b> _____	<b>35</b>
	Macro Dimension: Higher Education System.....	35
	Mezzo Dimension: Institutional Management.....	36
	Micro Dimension: Teaching Learning Process.....	37
	<b>Some recommendations</b> _____	<b>38</b>
	<b>Finally,</b> _____	<b>40</b>

## Summary

Since the mid 90's, almost all countries in Iberoamerica have initiated quality assurance (QA) processes of higher education, which have evolved with differences in implementation, progress, characteristics, and outcomes.

This report is the result of an exploratory study on the impact of QA in the countries of the region with more consolidated systems – at least from the viewpoint of institutionality and coverage. Its main objective is to increase the knowledge about the changes linked to quality assurance, through a survey of the opinions of a wide range of stakeholders in seven countries. The report summarizes the perceptions that link changes, impacts and effects to quality assurance, according to three dimensions: the higher education system, institutional management, and teaching.

Through the views of the different respondents it is possible to find certain constants among countries, not only in terms of positive changes that can be attributed to QA, but also certain negative undesired effects. Likewise, the opinions gathered show many differences among the actors and countries surveyed, which have also been systematized in this report in order better to understand the variability in progress and reach of these processes.

The main purpose of the project carried out by CINDA is to improve quality management of higher education, both at the level of national systems and of institutions; and to contribute to the creation of knowledge and mutual trust regarding the quality of higher education among Latin American and European countries. In this context, an important additional aim is to suggest alternatives to improve QA institutionality and good practices, making policy recommendations on the basis of the information gathered and the comparative international analysis.

For this purpose, special consideration has been given to the impact and effect of QA practices on the higher education systems in the chosen different systems of higher education in the selected countries: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Spain, Mexico, and Portugal.

## 1. Introduction

This study was carried out within the context of the project 'Quality Assurance: public policy and university management' carried out by *Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo (CINDA)*<sup>2</sup>. The project started in 2008 and has involved 26 universities in 16 Latin American and European countries.

The main objectives were to assess the impact of QA mechanisms in various contexts and to build capacity for better quality management.

For this, the project followed two lines of action, focused on:

1. to assess the impact of evaluation and accreditation processes, through the development of frame of reference, the design and testing of a set of instruments to explore perceptions of the efficacy and relevance of EQA, and its application at thirty universities in seven countries; and
2. to design and test a set of training modules for QA, promoting the instruction and development of good practices in the region.

The outcomes associated to the first line of action are presented in this report.

### 1.1 QA models and processes in the Region

QA processes, same as in a significant part of the developed world and also countries in transition, have been carried out in Iberoamerica since the early 90s. They were developed in response to the major transformations affecting higher education, in particular its massive expansion and increasing differentiation.

However, progress in terms of QA in the region is quite dissimilar. Whereas some countries have managed to institutionalize these processes and expanded to cover a significant part of their higher education systems, others have remained for several years at the design stage and, while having formally established quality assurance arrangements, they have developed processes only at a limited scale, rather focusing on gaining experience, making agreements, and creating the necessary conditions and skills for the consolidation of these processes.

This paper focuses on a study of the impact of QA in those countries that demonstrated greater progress, although, it is important to note that there are differences among these. As can be seen in the characterization of the QA systems considered in this study, there are important differences in terms of the objectives, institutionality, characteristics, coverage, and reach of the QA processes. However, it is true these are explained by the also dissimilar historical conditions and characteristics of the higher education systems they

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Quality Assurance: Public Policy and University Management' Project, ALFA N° DCI-ALA 2008/42, funded by the European Community

serve. This report relays, precisely, the differences among these countries, since the analysis of the impact of QA acquires real meaning when it considers the context where it unfolds.

## 1.2 Theoretical framework

Although all quality assurance systems in the realm of higher education aim toward quality assessment, these can pursue different purposes. This affects, to a great extent, the design and integration of the mechanisms used and also the impact of these on the system. Such purposes can be loosely classified as quality control (licensing), accountability (accreditation), or improvement (academic audit).

Quality control is intended to guarantee that national higher education systems reach a basic, or threshold, level of quality. Accreditation, in turn, permits periodic assessment of the performance of institutions and programs on the basis of quality standards; guides higher education institutions toward what is considered an appropriate level of development —by making explicit the existing expectations on their performance. The quality improvement approach recognizes that the responsibility for quality lies with the higher education institutions and, at the same time, assumes that these institutions have the capacity to develop and apply effective self regulatory policies and mechanisms, in continuous progress toward increasing levels of quality.

Following these distinctions, systems in the region are characterized by a focus on accountability, mostly through the accreditation of disciplines or programs.

As available research shows, it is no easy task to provide public guarantee of quality and simultaneously promote improvement. It is necessary to reach a certain balance between these purposes, and, occasionally, for several QA mechanisms to operate in coordination. In practice, QA systems, although they share some characteristics and objectives across countries and regions, also show different features and areas of emphasis, in response to the characteristics of the higher education systems they serve.

In these circumstances, the issue of the impact of QA has now gained significant interest at international level. Available studies have led to a debate about the magnitude of the benefits obtained. Whereas for some these mechanisms have significantly mobilized higher education institutions —with a visible impact on quality control and/or improvement— others, while recognizing certain progress, see a tendency toward increasing bureaucratization and excessive routine burdens that do not contribute to the culture of quality.

It is also necessary to consider, that although in general terms the option for QA processes has not involved an excessive financial cost to fulfill the objectives proposed, these are costly processes in terms of time and dedication by specialized staff and highly-trained academic human resources.

QA is proposed as an alternative to traditional centralized control mechanisms in higher education, offering multiple assessment alternatives, applicable to systems that face major challenges due to their expansion and increasing complexity. Hence the assessment of the impact and outcomes of QA is an important issue from the viewpoint of public policy and future adaptations.

In the international academic world, assessment of the impact and outcomes of QA has met with major methodological debate and driven a profound discussion about the dynamics and transformations of higher education, *vis-à-vis* the emphasis on quality.

In such a context, several methodological difficulties are addressed in international literature. The most important of these are related to: (i) the constant difficulty in defining quality and its many uses and meanings according to the context and perspective with which it is judged (Harvey & Green, 1993; Westerheijden, 1999; Harvey & Newton, 2007; Vlasceanu *et al*, UNESCO CEPES, 2007, among others) and (ii) the evident difficulty in isolating causes and effects, since EQA processes are only one of the various factors that influence the development of higher education institutions (Stensaker, 2003).

With regard to the concept of quality, it is worth noting that the CINDA study agreed on a definition that takes into consideration the capacity of an institution or program to respond to external expectations and to its internal purposes and goals, consistently organizing processes to achieve the pursued objectives.

Internal consistency emphasizes the need to concentrate on the institutional purpose and objectives, enabling an institution to adjust its actions to its principles and priorities; external consistency, on the other hand, refers to the institution or program organizing its resources and processes toward fulfilling the requirements and expectations of the relevant social environment, and its most significant reference group (disciplinary, professional, or type of institution). This ensures that the outcomes of the institution or program are reliable and in line with standards for the discipline, profession, or respective institutional category (or system standards, if this were the case).

In terms of the relationship to the purpose, the institution or program should fulfill its own purpose (internal consistence) and the purpose imposed by the external environment (external consistence).

This way of addressing quality means it is possible to apply the same conceptual framework to different types of institutions and programs, and at the same time provides a rigorous approach to quality assessment, insofar as it makes it possible to identify internal and external requirements and translate these into valid and applicable standards.

As to the more substantive discussion about the quality of higher education, evidence contributed to date by the assessment of EQA impact is partial and largely inconclusive. Certainly, much progress has been made in knowledge

about the changes occurred after assessment processes in terms of organization (Brennan & Shah, 2000) or the perceived impact by various institutional actors (Newton, 2002; Horsburgh, 1999; Bornman *et al.*, 2006). Still pending, however, is the probably most important dimension of EQA and that has to do with the teaching-learning process (Stensaker, 2008). This report explicitly addresses such dimension and forwards some suggestions.

The great majority of available studies are institutional or national in scope, and few are multinational/regional. In Chile, for example, several studies can be identified that point to changes in culture at higher education institutions, *vis-à-vis* quality assurance (Silva, 2006; Lemaitre, 2005; González, 2008).

At the international level, one of the studies of greatest reach to date was carried out by IMHE/OECD (Brennan & Shah, 2000), which made an important contribution on organizational changes after assessment processes at 29 universities in 14 countries.

This study by CINDA (2009-11) is of a similar scale, although focused on the Iberoamerican region. Contrary to other similar initiatives, this study emphasized research on policies, identifying progress and difficulties in countries with more consolidated QA systems, and focused on defining necessary support actions to accompany these processes in countries with emerging QA.

In the following section this paper presents comments on the research methodology used. Afterwards, it describes the main results obtained according to the three dimensions considered (macro, or higher education system level; mezzo, or institutional management level; and micro – teaching and learning level). The report ends with discussion of some tensions and makes suggestions for the design of public policy to improve the institutionality and practices of QA processes.

## 2. Methodological considerations

It seems important to insist that this is an exploratory study. It was determined as such, since it addresses an issue that is new to the region and regarding which available international research is still limited. Likewise, it is essentially a study of the perception of impacts, rather than of impacts as such. In this sense, it gathers information from those stakeholders that seem most relevant and who are directly involved in QA in each of the participating countries.

It is also important to state that, since the design stage of the study, it was clearly understood that it was impossible to isolate the impact of QA processes from other initiatives –some implemented by the institutions themselves, others as the result of public policy— carried out to improve quality at higher education institutions, especially in terms of teaching and management. It was also clear to CINDA that QA mechanisms could be affected by the unanticipated effect of the implementation of other public policies. These limitations led to the decision to do a study of perceptions, gathering the opinion of the main stakeholders.

The respondents involved in the study were selected based on their relevance, by virtue of their role and perspective in relation to QA: sometimes an internal role, sometimes an external one; either as individuals directly responsible, or as mere users. The following actors were considered for the survey of opinions on QA impacts:

- Governmental authorities, as representatives of public policy
- Vice rectors and directors of planning, as individuals responsible for institutional management
- Deans, heads of department and faculty members, as actors directly involved in process development, but also in the more direct work with quality in higher education
- Students and graduates, as stakeholders and internal users of QA
- And finally professional associations<sup>3</sup>, as external QA stakeholders

Information was gathered through semi structured interviews, focus groups, and structured questionnaires. Various qualitative analysis techniques were used, essentially to gather perceptions of impacts related to QA in the selected countries, proposing certain hypotheses and collecting evidence of positive and negative changes —according to the selected dimensions— in higher education, and to contribute to the design and adjustment of public policies intended to improve quality management of higher education, especially in terms of the organization and practices of QA.

---

<sup>3</sup> The pilot stage of the study also included a sample of employers. However, the difficulty in identifying qualified respondents in this sector, as well as the scant information gathered, led to their exclusion from the final stage in the study. Instead, the decision was made to include information about the labor market in the survey of graduates.



The procedure for gathering information was determined by the CINDA team together with local experts in each of the participating countries.

The selection of the sample of institutions and actors taking part was also determined with ample participation by each of the selected countries, taking the following conditions into account:

- Selected countries had to have at least five years of systematic application of quality assurance processes
- The overall sample of HEI in each country had to include public and private universities, both regional and metropolitan, with demonstrable participation in QA processes
- Respondents were selected by country and institution, following a set of commonly agreed upon criteria.

CINDA designed the instruments and determined the protocol for their application, all constantly coordinated with the technical teams formed in each of the participating countries.

The methodology was previously validated by applying it in a pilot exercise carried out in two countries. Several adjustments were made as a result of this exercise: to the selection of responders, to the instruments as such, and to the way in which they were applied. In fact, the number of institutional authorities was increased and diversified, including academic vice rectors, directors of planning, deans, and heads of department. The questionnaire for students and graduates was modified to be answered on-line directly by the respondents; the language used in the instruments was amended, asking the experts in each country to adjust them to the local language<sup>4</sup>; most of the instruments were shortened.

Application of the instruments and the protocol for gathering information from all selected actors and universities was carried out in each of the countries by specialized consulting firms, under the supervision of the project steering team.

It is important to observe this was a very complex study, which had to address several methodological challenges: from different language usage to the involvement of experts from a variety of backgrounds in different countries.

The study prioritized the internal validity of the instruments applied in each country, emphasizing the use of definitions and their meanings for actors and experts, but there was some evidence of non-uniform usage of certain terms. Nevertheless, these are minor difficulties, which in global terms do not affect the validity and reliability of the findings. The differences found were recorded

---

<sup>4</sup> Even though Spanish was the common language for six of the participating countries, there are significant differences in the use of important concepts and words; this required the coordinating team to write detailed definitions of some of the most important concepts, thus making it possible to the local teams to adjust the wording of the instruments without changing the meaning of the concepts.

and the instruments were adjusted accordingly, thereby improving the chances of applying them in future studies to replicate the proposed methodology.

For the purpose of this study, selection of the most important aspects, as well as drafting of the final conclusions, essentially involved comprehensive analyses of the various reports drafted in each country. The information received is of great value and scope. The level of detail of the reports, although dissimilar among countries, contains a wealth of information that will undoubtedly be used in future research.

Finally, the summary of the results of the study was based on several successive readings of the national reports, which made it possible to identify a set of regularities as well as aspects specific to countries or respondents, with relation to the three dimensions of the study (higher education system; institutional management; and teaching and learning).

Thus, the search for regularities and specifics took into account:

- First, those recorded in each of the national reports. This made it possible to identify those aspects where the impact of QA was perceived in all or most of the countries, as well as those that were only recorded in some specific countries.
- Second, the analysis focused on the different actors or stakeholders consulted in all countries. In this way, it was possible to identify perceptions of impact that were repeated among several of the actors consulted, or others that mainly corresponded to one actor in particular, without major differences among the selected countries in the study.
- Finally, in particular cases, regularities and specifics according to the background of the actors consulted, when such information was available. The following two distinctions were considered in particular: external or internal to the universities, and belonging to public or private universities.

Reading the country reports not only allowed the authors to identify the regularities and specifics mentioned above, but also to make inferences that could explain findings in a comparative analysis. These inferences were based on the features of the national higher education systems, and of the quality assurance schemes as well as on the perspectives usually attributed to these actors.

Thus, our analysis is accompanied by various hypothesis related to detected regularities and specifics, which can be linked to historical similarities and differences, institutional as well as cultural, among countries. In any case, these are merely inferences made according to the available information and which should be explored further in future studies.

### 3. Results

The results are presented in this section, according to the three proposed dimensions (higher education system —macro; institutional management —mezzo; and teaching and learning —micro) and each of the sub-dimensions showing QA related impacts.

#### 3.1. Macro dimension: Higher education and QA system

The perceptions of various stakeholders associated to possible changes in the institutionality and operation of QA were explored in the context of their higher education systems. The study took into consideration six different areas where changes could be identified: 3.1.1. Operation of QA agencies; 3.1.2. General information about higher education; 3.1.3. Efforts and progress related to internationalization; 3.1.4. The role of the State in the context of higher education; 3.1.5. Horizontal and vertical articulation mechanisms; and 3.1.6. Level of penetration of the theme of quality in the general public, and the use of accreditation as an instrument for external positioning and marketing.

Various changes can be seen in this dimension. Overall, the majority of countries show changes in the spheres of QA institutionalization, the development of information systems, and the new role of the State in higher education, and its relationship with HEIs. On the other hand, less obvious changes are evident in the areas of internationalization, articulation of the various levels of training, and public awareness of the issue of quality/accreditation.

##### 3.1.1. QA institutionality and operation

All participating countries have QA agencies established and in operation since the mid or late 1990s. These agencies have developed criteria and procedures for quality assessment, which have been applied regularly to, at least, a significant sector of each higher education system. The various actors consulted had full knowledge of the QA systems in their countries, and were able to identify a significant set of strengths and weaknesses associated to their institutionality and operation.

Progress in new legislation about QA is positively appreciated in several countries (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica). The organization of QA agencies varies among different countries, as well as the perceptions about their reliability and level of credibility. Quite favorable perceptions were expressed in Colombia and Argentina and somewhat more critical in Mexico and Chile. In the first two countries, strong emphasis is placed on the leadership and the central role of the agencies in charge of QA processes, whereas in the other two countries critics point out inconsistencies in the application of criteria, limited and poor use of indicators, lack of rigor in the

accreditation decisions and conflicts of interest, all put forward as shortcomings especially affecting private decentralized agencies.

On the one hand, the external actors consulted (higher education authorities, authorities of agencies and professional associations) report positive changes thanks to the institutional organization for QA, which has led to greater participation and involvement of the various related organizations, has improved the available information on higher education and training in certain fields and, in general terms, has contributed to a certain order and a more comprehensive approach to the higher education system.

On the other hand, internal actors (university leaders, deans, heads of department) also highlight that thanks to QA processes, information systems have improved, and that there is better control and order in higher education. Nevertheless, various critical appreciations were also raised with regard to the operation of the processes themselves, specifically problems with criteria and procedures, training and practice of peer reviewers, and the manner and time for adoption of accreditation decisions by agencies.

Although the depth of these criticisms varies among countries, they refer to the procedures used for defining assessment criteria and their arbitrary application, the bureaucratization of certain procedures, the training and independence of peer reviewers, and the transparency and impartiality of the decisions made by agencies.

The excessive bureaucracy associated to QA processes was highlighted in several countries (Mexico and Spain), as well as their slowness and non-observance of deadlines (Chile). The counterpart to improvement of the information systems would be the overload of information requirements, a circumstance especially expressed by internal university actors in most countries.

Sharper criticism of the performance and training of peer reviewers comes, in general, from internal university actors. University top and middle leaders question their performance, claiming the need for improved practices, greater consideration of institutional diversity, and a collaborative approach, rather than a competitive one.

In some countries there is strong criticism of the use of excessively inflexible and occasionally inappropriate indicators. This criticism appears especially in those countries that have linked QA processes to the use of indicators. Once again, the internal and intermediary institutional actors demand inclusion of more qualitative and flexible assessment methods, which genuinely take into account diversity and innovative practices, avoiding biases and arbitrary measures in the selection and definition of indicators.

On the other hand, there is widespread recognition of the improvement of instruments to gather and disseminate information about higher education,

although many limitations – especially related to access and validity of the data – still persist. In particular, with regard to the information linked to accreditation agencies, widespread claims were made for greater dissemination and transparency of the results, as well as of the procedures used by agencies to reach their decisions. It would appear there is still much to do in terms of making the results of accreditation widely disseminated—they are known to authorities and experts but do not reach public opinion, not even the higher education academic staff and students.

QA seems to be linked to several changes that various actors recognize in higher education, some positive and others rather negative. Opinions about these changes, however, are related to the progress, characteristics, and institutionalization achieved by QA in different countries. Whereas in some countries the progress of accreditation covers a wide range of institutions and/or programs, in others its coverage is restricted to certain sectors of higher education. Whereas some QA systems have different processes—institutional and program reviews, national and regional processes, licensing and accreditation—others only have one approach. Whereas some systems have a centralized institutionality, based on a recognizable national agency, others have developed a considerably more decentralized system, where various agencies—some of them private—coexist.

Opinions about the institutionality and operation of QA is seen to be more positive where its progress is more clearly defined, when its processes are more focused, and there it operates in a centralized way. Perceptions are somewhat more negative in countries where there is greater coverage, diverse processes, and decentralized institutionality. All in all, the most direct criticisms tend to be directed toward those actors seen as more independent from the central authority: private agencies and peer reviewers.

### *3.1.2. Information about the higher education system*

An important issue to be consulted was the contribution of QA processes to greater systematization and dissemination of information about the higher education system, taking into account access, relevance, and use by the various stakeholders. Information systems in the participating countries tend to address three types of users: government and policymakers, higher education institutions, and the general public (mainly, students and their families).

As already explained, there is a widespread opinion that national systems have improved significantly, providing more and better information, in a considerably more transparent context. However, this is also associated to persisting difficulties regarding access to, universality, reliability, transparency, and validity of the available information about higher education.

In general, external authorities (government officials, agency directors) have very positive opinions; university leaders (academic vice rectors and directors of planning) also have reasonably positive appreciations about national information systems. Both groups of stakeholders highlight the contribution made by the improved information systems to management of the system as a whole, as well as management of higher education institutions as such.

Other respondents, especially heads of department and academic staff appreciate the availability of more and better information, but are also quite vocal when stating that they feel increasingly under pressure by the demand to provide information, the excessive rigidity of the definitions, and the validity assigned to certain indicators that are not necessarily adjusted to the characteristics of their institutions. In certain countries, there is additional criticism about the unnecessary workload and bureaucracy associated to these efforts, and which are not seen to have an equivalent return in terms of the quality and timeliness of the information received back.

The various perspectives consulted reveal a strong link between QA and changes in the information systems, both positive as well as negative. Hence the widespread opinion expressed about the need to improve the organization of the available information and its dissemination. Access to information is not always the best, on account of technical difficulties, the complexity of the definitions and the timeliness of its release.

Although in general the various stakeholders report having ample opportunity to use the information and the possibility to make comparisons, they also mention that there are certain risks in terms of definitions and the use of information, not only confusing but also sometimes biased and inappropriate. Reaching agreement about definitions of indicators that are considered useful, relevant, and that respect the diversity of the system appears to be a more difficult task than it seemed originally.

Quality, validity, and reliability of the information are core issues, which have different expressions according to the characteristics of the systems in each country. Hence, for example, the progress and transparency achieved in Colombia is evident, although some criticize the excessive centralization and scant communication between the authority in charge and the higher education institutions. The issue of validity and reliability is closely linked, among other things, to bias and mistrust. In some countries, possible biases induced by government or by certain university sectors were mentioned, as well as mistrust stemming from the possibility that particular sectors could conceal, manipulate, or even fake public information. In Chile, Colombia, Portugal, and Mexico, various proposals were made in this regard, and in Costa Rica there was reference to long delays in the publication of information. Some criticism was heard from public university authorities with regard to the private institutions, due to the lack of transparency and veracity of the latter; some authorities of private universities criticized public HEIs, which tend to impose traditional data and indicators that hinder innovation and discriminate against diversity.

With regard to access to information, in the majority of countries the systems are directed at the academic world. In some countries there are increasing efforts to provide information to parents, students, and the public at large. Here, there is a strong emphasis regarding information about employability, salary levels and the labor market in general. However, in spite of the existence of more public information, this does not seem to reach the public at large.

Spain and Portugal reported that national information systems were a recent development. This is a highly interesting comment, since it suggests the need to explore further two core issues that must be considered when assessing the progress perceived in different countries:

- On the one hand, it is evident that the development of information (data and indicators) about higher education among countries is very dissimilar. Whereas there are countries with a long tradition in gathering and publishing historical statistics, others are just taking their first steps in terms of gathering and systematizing basic data. Hence appreciation of changes could be greatly distorted: in some cases, changes which are perceived as significant may be related to the provision of basic and elementary information; in others, significant progress in the definition of complex and developed indicators can be seen as relatively minor.
- In addition, disparity in the status of the information systems means that the notion of an information system in higher education and its connection to QA was also very different among countries. Analysis of the different national reports showed that while in some countries, QA related changes were associated to greater order and the availability of basic statistics about higher education previously not available, in other countries, expectations involved progress in information which was considerably richer and more transparent, within a context of continuous quality improvement.

A clear symptom of the above can be seen in one question of the instrument applied, and which referred to the existence of national information systems that reported “relevant information”. Answers significantly differed by country, accounting for the dissimilar levels of development of these systems and different notions and expectations.

### ***3.1.3. Internationalization***

Internationalization appears in specialized literature as a sphere of great importance linked to the appearance and development of QA. Therefore, questions were asked about its perceived impact, especially with regard to the mobility of students and professionals, and mutual recognition of studies and degrees/titles.

In all countries of Latin America, widespread opinion is that there is very limited progress in this area. The European countries considered in this study, Portugal and Spain are a clear exception, but even in these countries, the connection to QA is weak.

In the case of Latin America there is clear perception of a lack of coordination at national level and mistrust among and within countries.

Progress consigned in terms of mobility is almost exclusively perceived as individual initiatives by the universities themselves, created on the basis of bilateral agreements without taking into account any arrangements among countries, when these exist. Universities also mention some mechanisms for mutual recognition between universities, which once again operate without reference to regional arrangements and mostly through the development of dual-degrees (some of which are controversial and criticized).

The limited progress perceived by universities with regard to the mobility and mutual recognition initiatives achieved by different countries in the region is striking. Government authorities and agencies emphasize the priority of the issue and list various initiatives carried out for several years, but they also recognize that this is an aspect where little or no progress has been made. Some authorities and academics provide a context for their opinion, trying to explain the difficulty in reaching agreements among countries on account of the major differences between countries and the prevailing mistrust in the region. It is precisely due to this that the strategy followed by universities has been to prioritize bilateral agreements, among institutions perceived as equivalent.

Only in Argentina it is reported that existing initiatives (especially ARCUSUR and RIACES) offer multiple opportunities for future internationalization. Mexico maintains that, although there are national agreements (e.g. with the USA), which involve commitments and opportunities in terms of internationalization, these are little known and implementation is considered slow and bureaucratic.



The general impression is that, although authorities in charge and QA agencies keep the issue of internationalization on their agendas, priorities have been assigned to other more urgent issues. Internationalization is an issue about which not much is known, available statistics are poor, and it seems necessary to first make significant progress with certain baseline conditions before creating the agreements that would make genuine change possible.

In the case of the two European countries in the study, changes are certainly recognized in terms of internationalization, although not necessarily linked to QA. Internationalization is a regional objective, managed by government and where the course of action is perceived as independent of QA and accreditation. Judgments regarding achievements are rather mixed and QA must adapt to prior supranational agreements.

It is necessary to mention some singularities in this regard. Internationalization in Costa Rica was also understood as the exchange of experience and good practices in QA, an area where significant changes are perceived. Thus, QA enjoys a strong international dimension that is expressed in the exchange of peer reviewers, experts, and assessment experiences (criteria, procedures, and assessment methodologies). This approach coincides with some opinions expressed with regard to the existence of collaboration networks (Argentina) and greater connections with foreign universities (Chile, Colombia).

Practically no country highlighted the mobility of professionals as a component linked to internationalization. It would appear to be a component still very distant, noticed only by some isolated actors who commented on the obstacles to professional practice by foreigners (i.e. in Argentina). Nevertheless, in some countries (Chile) there was mention of the need to make progress in mutual recognition of degrees/titles and studies, using the Bologna process as a benchmark.

#### ***3.1.4. Role of the State***

Possible changes in the role played by the State (government or other public authorities related to higher education) were explored in this dimension, in terms of the approach to regulation of higher education, relevance of the QA regulatory framework, and its connection to other policies or policy instruments (access, funding, research, and so on).

A first point worth noting is that, in all the countries studied, QA appeared as a public policy decision, usually promoted through incentives (special funding for students or their institutions, policies for hiring academic staff, among others). In fact, in all countries, the establishment of QA was an initiative managed with significant participation by governments. As mentioned earlier, the existence of these systems has involved, in the great majority of cases, changes in standards and regulation, linking QA to other aspects of higher education regulation.

This does not mean that QA necessarily follows, in all Latin American countries, an equivalent course to those of the selected countries. What can be maintained is that, at least in all the countries that have, comparatively, greater or earlier experience in QA (that is, the countries selected for this study), QA was a government initiative, linked to the use of incentives and which has generated noteworthy changes in national regulations.

According to most of the institutional stakeholders, incentives are seen as one of the principal factors leading to the participation in accreditation and evaluation processes; this despite the recognition that QA is clearly beneficial for HEIs.

In some countries the incentives were used for all HEI in the system, whereas in others they made distinctions between public and private institutions. In both cases, there has been criticism and certain controversy:

- When QA systems make no distinction between institutions —i.e. public/private, national/regional, or research/teaching, among other possible classifications— critical voices are raised due to the indifferent treatment of institutions that are in fact profoundly different, making them compete as though they were the same.
- When QA systems do make a distinction between institutions —usually public/private— critical opinions are expressed with regard to discrimination created by the system or the preferential treatment received by some to the detriment of others.

These critical opinions are proof of the diversity of positions about the issue, certainly controversial in countries where QA is linked to incentives, occasionally so relevant that they can make a difference among institutions.

The type of incentives reported relate to student funding through loans and grants, funding of HEIs through their participation in projects, and preferential recruitment by the State of graduates from accredited disciplines.

The instrument also explored the nature of university participation in QA systems, receiving a diversity of answers. In general, ample participation by institutions was reported in the definition of QA criteria and procedures. Not necessarily reflected was participation by institutions in other issues, such as the definition of policies or the establishment of standards and more general regulatory frameworks, although they were consulted during these processes. Likewise, participation is linked to the stage of initial definitions, and not to a permanent policy linked to continuous improvement of criteria and procedures.

On account of this, and although internal actors very positively value this space for participation, when they exist, there is certain criticism of increasing restrictions in systems that, in their view, have tended to become more technical and bureaucratic and less open to academic discussion among institutions. Finally, decisions in many countries appear to have been made by

experts and institutions have little incidence on the design, operation, and scope of the system (Portugal).

In addition, in some countries there was mention of certain characteristics related to a changed relationship between the State and the universities. In several cases, there was mention of progress toward an “evaluative” State, and an apparent diminution of autonomy, as a result of permanent assessment.

### ***3.1.5. Horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms***

The connection between QA and changes in mechanisms to facilitate or promote horizontal intra and inter-institutional mobility among programs of the same educational level and among different higher education institutions, and vertical mobility between programs of different educational level and institutions that offer different titles/degrees (e.g. typically, mobility between technical and professional training, or between professional and post-graduate training) was also explored.

Same as with the issue of internationalization, coordination of training would seem to be a key QA task. In this study, however, opinions tended to express, in a general way, a poor level of progress in this sphere. Horizontal and vertical coordination is defined as a work to be carried out rather than an achievement. Only in some countries is there mention of certain recent progress, indicating there is still a lot to be done.

University respondents report that coordination has followed the initiative of institutions (and not QA), but that it is hindered by many intra and inter-institutional difficulties, mainly linked to administrative obstacles and, once again, lack of trust. In some countries there was mention of opportunities offered for modularization and competency-based training, which would allow progress in this sphere. However, once again, it is not related to QA. Only in Colombia and Mexico some reports mention a certain relationship to QA, mainly expressed by the greater curricular flexibility fostered by program review processes carried out within the framework of QA. In Spain and Portugal, in spite of having policies for this purpose, no positive progress is mentioned, and existing initiatives are not attributed to QA.

General perception is that there is no real progress in coordination, as neither is there institutional collaboration. Barriers persist among institutions and the issue of inter-institutional coordination would not seem to be considered a significant objective when defining QA criteria or procedures.

### ***3.1.6. QA and public opinion***

Questions in this field refer to the level of dissemination of the QA system in the general public, as well as to the use of accreditation as an instrument for

external positioning and marketing. There were specific questions about possible changes in public understanding of the importance and scope of quality in higher education, and knowledge of QA criteria, processes, and results.

There is evidence of a widespread concern about the issue of quality, clearly present in ample sectors of public opinion. However, even though QA has contributed to provide the public with more and better information, this is not considered to be effective. Public opinion needs and demands are not really understood, and although there is a perception that the information provided is not necessarily the information needed—in terms of relevance or transparency—neither is it clear what should be reported with regard to the quality of education provision.

QA is not an activity broadly known; very much on the contrary, the perception of various actors is that development of QA processes is recognized only in certain circles. There is much concern about the excessive impact of advertising over and above the information provided by other means, such as, for example QA. In several countries there was mention of the need to regulate institutional publicity, providing greater guidance to applicants and carrying out actions for better dissemination of QA.

The responsibility for penetrating public opinion, in the view of various internal actors of the higher education institutions, is shared by the government and QA agencies. In Argentina, Chile, and Colombia, for example, it is said that agencies should improve the information given to the public; and in Spain, Argentina, and Mexico, that government should provide better guidance and information about educational opportunities to applicants and their families in general. Only in the case of Mexico do some actors say that the dissemination of information depends mainly on the institutions themselves, who must responsibly provide the information.

Some countries show special characteristics: Argentina and Mexico do not seem to consider QA relevant with regard to public opinion, even in those sectors more closely linked to higher education. In Costa Rica and Portugal, QA systems are scarcely known to the public. In several countries, QA outcomes are not always communicated accurately by the institutions (Argentina, Chile, and Colombia), occasionally giving incomplete, unclear, or very late information.

QA is an issue that has made significant progress within higher education institutions, but it is not very visible to external stakeholders and considerably less at the level of public opinion. The most visible public face of higher education tends to be greatly influenced by advertising, although there is significant progress in terms of information systems for the public. Government and agencies do not appear to have been particularly active in openly informing about their work and QA criteria and outcomes. General perception is that

although the theme of quality is strongly established in public opinion, QA processes and the contributions and opportunities they provide are not.

## 3.2. Institutional management

Under this dimension, possible changes within HEIs that could be attributed to QA were explored. This dimension refers to internal QA; that is, practices for controlling, improving and assuring quality that are carried out as part of institutional management as such.

Possible changes were considered in relation to seven specific areas: 3.2.1. Adoption and institutionalization of internal QA mechanisms and processes; 3.2.2. Development of information systems within universities (basically associated to institutional management); 3.2.3. Management, governance, and administration of universities and programs; 3.2.4. Management of teaching in particular; 3.2.5. Management of the academic/faculty body; 3.2.6. Administrative and financial management; and 3.2.7. Inclusion and participation of various stakeholders (students, graduates, professional associations, and so on) in internal QA processes.

### 3.2.1. Institutionalization of QA

The focus of this area was the implementation of QA mechanisms and processes and its institutionalization within universities at various organizational levels.

All universities highlighted not only the development of various QA processes, but also their progressive institutionalization. This is especially expressed in the establishment of technical units, generally at central level, which provide support to the executive leadership of the universities (with certain techno structure<sup>5</sup> characteristics). These are units with specialized professionals that create and manage information, conduct regular monitoring processes, and support academic units in their internal assessment processes.

Although with different levels of depth, in all countries there was recognition of the increasing development of an assessment culture, relevant from the viewpoint of maintaining QA practices. Permanent socialization and training activities carried out by authorities have allowed such a culture to progress.

---

<sup>5</sup> [1] Henry Mintzberg (1979, 2000) identifies techno structure as one of the five essential components of modern organizations. This is the component that serves strategic objectives for design, analysis, standardization, control, and planning, among the most important, usually found subordinate to management and outside the line of operational work, and carried out by highly specialized process analysts.

Perception of the institutionalization and progress of QA is positive, especially among university top authorities. This is attributed primarily to the accreditation processes carried out, both at the program and institutional levels. Institutional leaders also report a link between these processes and institutional planning and management.

Deans, heads of department and faculty members have mixed views regarding the progress of QA. While recognizing its merit, they point out that QA has restricted academic development, the traditional autonomy and freedom of academic staff. They explain that these mechanisms increase the importance of criteria determined from a more technical than academic viewpoint. The institutionalization of QA has adopted management and assessment models that restrict the space typically held by academics; these models, in addition, increase their bureaucratic burden with a set of excessively formal processes and procedures, carried out by technical bodies pertaining to relatively centralized units.

Thus, what on the one hand has brought about important process improvements—such as review and updating of study plans, programming and academic development, and fine-tuning of budgetary priorities, among others—on the other hand has implicated increasing managerialism, which in a significant share of countries is seen as an undesired trend associated to QA.

This criticism comes essentially from middle management and the academics themselves, whereas it is apparently unperceived by top authorities. For the latter, institutionalization of QA is positive, as it allows them to better carry out their functions. Their criticism, when it exists, has more to do with the slowness or an insufficient culture of assessment.

With regard to aspects where full institutionalization has not yet been achieved, there is mention of monitoring more complex processes, such as teaching-learning, and follow-up of students and graduates. Connection of QA processes to the budget formulation, execution, and control is still ongoing, in relation to which central authorities claim the need for further efforts.

Criticism of managerialism, especially among academics, is an important finding in this dimension. Some respondents clearly consider managerialism a problem, especially when QA becomes an end in itself, following the external pace imposed by agency accreditation processes (Colombia, Spain). Thus, it is estimated that internal QA units, greatly influenced by technical considerations, tend not to appreciate academic criteria or culture.

Also criticized is the increasing bureaucratization driven by agency accreditation processes and replicated by central units at the universities. This puts pressure on academics, unnecessarily increasing administrative burdens and distracting them from other tasks considered more important. This is especially evident at larger universities and in those countries where QA has been around longer.

### *3.2.2. Development of institutional information systems*

The focus here was the perceived impact of QA on the development of institutional information systems, specifically on those linked to internal management of the institutions as such. Although in this section the instrument individualized this specific dimension of information, opinions surveyed did not necessarily discriminate among different information types.

In general, there is consensus that QA accompanies the establishment of information systems within higher education institutions. If the systems were nonexistent, QA has allowed them to be set up. If they did exist previously, QA has contributed to their significant improvement. Accordingly, progress in this dimension is observed in all countries. The magnitude of the impact and its appreciation would appear to be greater in Costa Rica, Colombia, and Chile, and somewhat less in Mexico, Portugal, and Spain.

Institutional information systems primarily serve institutional and academic management. Hence it is top authorities (academic vice rectors, director of planning, and deans) that most clearly perceive the benefits of having these information systems, probably on account of their managerial responsibilities.

There is, however, certain heterogeneity in terms of the levels of complexity and detail of the information systems, very much related to the modes and scope of management. In this regard, it was possible to appreciate certain differences between public and private universities. Whereas in public universities the systems are strongly directed toward accountability, in private universities the purpose of the systems is more strategic and directive. Some cross-criticism was observed: public universities were perceived to be more bureaucratic, while in private universities, managerial practices were considered to prevail.

Faculty members, however, observe certain progress in this sphere, but do not always perceive its usefulness. Their perception is they are required to report data, but then either they do not have access to the information created or it does not respond to their needs. Various critical opinions were observed among academics and faculty members due to excessive pressure and bureaucracy in the generation of information.

In several countries, top authorities as well as heads of department and academic staff reported problems related to the integration of different systems, difficulties in access, reliability, and the use of data.

There was repeated mention of the integration of systems, as a criticism of the existence of many systems that operate separately and are rarely connected. Many respondents think that the integration of information systems would resolve many difficulties related to access and relevance *vis-à-vis* individual information needs.

There are also repeated opinions about the need to generate more and more detailed information, as if the constant accumulation of information could ensure better academic and institutional management. This is not a minor issue, since there is a clear perception of increased availability of information, its limited link to internal needs, the fact that it seems to fuel further demand for new information and the complaint about the increased workload associated to the provision of data.

Progress in this sphere has included recording the inputs considered in decision-making processes. In most countries, information systems have included surveys of external stakeholders (e.g. graduates and employers) as well as various internal assessment instruments (faculty surveys, oversight reports, and so on). Additionally, in some countries there was mention of efforts made to develop new data and indicators, attempting to respond to more complex institutional management requirements (related to resource management, for example) and academic needs (teaching-learning).

As in the case of information about the higher education system, it is necessary to consider that in this area, there is no baseline for the development of institutional information. Therefore the progress perceived and the level of complexity of the information systems, at institutions and in countries, could have very different meanings.

### *3.2.3. Management, governance, and administration of HEIs and programs*

Issues in this area refer to possible changes in management, governance, and administration of institutions and programs. It must be taken into account that this is a particularly complex sphere, where changes could occur due to a multiplicity of factors, QA being only one of these and not even the most important.

A first finding is the type of change, where a series of formal and structural changes can be seen, but also informal, cultural changes. In most countries there is a positive appreciation regarding the changes observed, with a particularly favourable view in Costa Rica and Colombia.

In spite of the difficulty in relating changes to QA, respondents in most countries credit QA with the improved recognition of institutional purposes as a relevant strategic definition, and with the use of planning as a managerial tool offering many opportunities for improvement. In both cases, changes are not only attributed to QA but also understood to be directly aimed at quality improvement.

With regard to the institutional purposes, QA processes push towards increased transparency and dissemination to the public. In addition, the fact that these statements must be reviewed, institutions have evaluated them for relevance, greater clarity, and adjustment. In terms of planning, QA has



promoted greater coordination between assessment and actions for improvement, and between self-assessment and planning, thus helping to integrate institutional development.

Several respondents considered that the formalization of QA processes, integrated to management as such, would contribute to the achievement of institutional objectives and to a better possibility for follow-up. Thus, some opinions – especially among institutional leaders – clearly value increased managerial formalization. Others, however, criticize the excessive formalization and rigidity introduced in managerial practices as a result of QA. This criticism tends to come from middle authorities and some academics and faculty members.

Changes in this area are more clearly perceived by university authorities. They highlight changes at the organizational level, such as the increasing inclusion of professionals specialized in process management, as well as a certain institutionalization of the support structure to develop these processes. Changes are also perceived at the process level, such as the increasing development of routines and protocols for decision making, control, and monitoring.

Once again, the emergence of significant new actors within university organizations can be seen: assessment and support units in the hands of technicians and professionals, usually non academic.

It is striking that the great majority of reported changes are related to the managerial area (organization and processes, formal and informal) but that no changes are relayed regarding the structure and governance of the institutions. It would be expected that changes in managerial practices such as those reported above should also have an impact on the way that universities are governed.

### *3.2.4. Institutional management of teaching*

Related to the above, questions addressed possible changes related to the way in which universities are organized internally to manage teaching activities as such.

One of the more outstanding findings is the recognition of the increasing value attributed to teaching within universities, and especially to curricular management.

The association between QA and changes in curricular management is evident and translates into changes linked to better and more participatory design, consideration of new demands, adjustment, updating, and other related issues.

Other changes mentioned in this respect relate to:

- i) Teaching and student services
- ii) Teaching/staff programming and coordination
- iii) Resource management for teaching, and
- iv) Implementation of mechanisms for permanent assessment and monitoring of study plans and programs.

Internal university actors (deans, heads of department, academic and teaching staff) more clearly appreciate changes in this area. Countries where there is greater appreciation of the impact on teaching management include Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica, and slightly less in Argentina and Mexico. There is little perceived progress in Spain and Portugal, and further, in these two countries it was reported that changes in teaching management are not necessarily attributable to QA.

### ***3.2.5. Management of the academic/faculty body***

This area focused on any possible changes to management and administration of the teaching body, in any field.

In the Latin American countries, important changes were seen in the criteria and practice for selection and hiring, including the establishment of more demanding requirements (holding of a PhD at many universities), and more competitive and transparent hiring practices.

Linked to the above, QA has implied increasing pressure on the number and credentials of the teaching body. In general, universities have had to ensure assure a greater number and dedication of time by their academics, simultaneously ensuring their academic, professional, and pedagogical training.

In Spain and Portugal, on the other hand, changes in this area, although important, would appear to follow other national policies developed directly in relation to the issue.

In Colombia, Costa Rica and, to a lesser extent, in Chile, changes are associated to the accreditation criteria and assessment standards, where the size, quality, and management of the academic body play an important role.

In some countries, responses identified increased order in terms of the definition and review of profiles for academic staff, and/or the assessment of available human resources and their development.

No changes were reported with regard to salary scales or staff development linked to research practices, with the exception of Argentina, where some statements about the links between QA and the development of academic staff, research and publications were made.

As in previous areas, deans, heads of department and academic staff directors, and faculty members more clearly appreciate changes in this dimension, linking

them more directly to QA. External authorities and other non-university stakeholders, although they do recognize impacts in this respect, do not necessarily attribute them to QA.

### *3.2.6. Administrative and financial management*

Administrative and financial management was especially considered as one possible area of change related to QA. When the instrument was applied, however, the great majority of respondents analyzed only the financial component of management, overlooking the administrative management of institutions.

The actors consulted relayed moderate to low impact by QA on administrative and financial management, either directly or under certain conditions that allow its improvement. It is important to highlight that impact is not significant or relevant in any country. There are some marginal opinions, mostly from teaching staff, which state that financial management has increased internal bureaucracy and generated created a greater administrative burden.

Countries could be arranged in the following way according to the perception of impact, from medium to nil: Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Argentina, Portugal, and Spain.

In Colombia and Costa Rica, QA has had an impact through the development of improvement plans, which define priorities regarding financial management and lead to greater order and coherence. Views from these countries highlight the links between assessment and planning, which take place in a context of strategic institutional development.

A wider range of opinions are observed in Chile and Argentina. There are institutions reporting some impact in this area (especially through improvement plans, performance agreements, greater administrative order), but this is not a generalized view.

In Mexico, Portugal, and Spain opinions show changes in this dimension but relate them to other policy measures, not necessarily linked to QA.

Unfortunately, no opinions were recorded about non-financial resource management, or the comments received were very marginal.

### *3.2.7. Participation of stakeholders in QA processes*

Questions were asked about possible changes in type and degree of participation in QA and assessment processes of various stakeholders, such as students, graduates, employers, professional associations.

Unfortunately, there were few responses to these questions, and the answers that were collected show a wide range of interpretation about areas of participation and stakeholders involved.

Participation of stakeholders in QA is understood as any action in one or more of the following initiatives:

- i) Defining assessment criteria and accreditation procedures
- ii) Institutional management and decision making
- iii) Participation of external stakeholders (basically graduates and employers) in self-assessment processes, and
- iv) Considering the opinion of external stakeholders (again, mostly graduates and employers) in the management of teaching within HEIs.

In general, opinions gathered show that participation —when it exists— tends to occur at a lower, informal, and scarcely determinant level.

In countries where external stakeholders are perceived as having a certain degree of influence, participation is limited to surveys (within the context of self-assessment processes) and to defining assessment criteria (at the initiative of QA agencies, or because of legal requirements). As mentioned earlier, some participation in the area of curricular design is also recognized.

Some respondents refer to the participation of external stakeholders in institutional management or the consideration of their views in institutional decisions (development plans, for example). In these cases, participation would appear not to relate to the implementation of QA mechanisms, but to institutional governance systems and community outreach.

Either way, impact in this area, when there is an impact, is very recent. The little consideration given to this aspect is striking, especially as this is a strategic dimension of quality assurance.

### **3.3. Micro dimension: teaching-learning process**

The following aspects were considered in this dimension: 3.3.1. Changes in graduation profiles (expected learning outcomes), study plans, and curriculum; 3.3.2. Analysis of information about student progression and achievement; 3.3.3. Assessment of student learning; and 3.3.4. Teaching and pedagogical strategies.

In this dimension, all respondents recognize important changes linked to the development of QA mechanisms, but also other motivations and processes. In fact, the relationship appears not to be direct nor exclusively of QA. Changes have to do with internal demands within HEIs, and also external pressure, such as the need to take into account labor market requirements.

Due to the direct link of students and teaching staff with the teaching and learning process, they are who most clearly see the changes linked to this dimension. In general, they describe a significant level of association between accreditation processes and the improvements they see in this dimension. It is worth noting, however, that faculty members also assign undesired effects to QA processes, such as for example increased bureaucracy and the considerable administrative workload that has been imposed on them.

### *3.3.1. Graduation profiles (expected learning outcomes), study plans, and curriculum*

In all countries, respondents report that HEIs have carried out curricular adjustment and updating processes. Views about changes to curricula and to study plan are clearer and more emphatic than those referring to changes in expected learning outcomes, although it seems difficult to update the first of these without the ensuing need to modernize the second.

Although all countries and respondents agree on these adjustments, the depth of these changes, their relationship to QA, and the assessment by different actors vary among countries and among various institutions within one country; this includes a few cases where changes are seen as tentative and merely formal.

Respondents trace changes to curricula and study plans to the need for programs to respond to the requirements of the environment. Thus, revisions have involved taking into consideration the views of graduates and employers and the needs of the “market” (although it is not clear how these are identified), and updating expected learning outcomes (occasionally including their explicit formalization). It is interesting to note that even though one of the explicit purposes of these revisions is to bring education and the labor market closer, and hence the most logical information providers would be employers, they have a minor role in these processes. Graduates, however, link QA with changes to programs and to the definition of expected learning outcomes.

Heads of departments, who are responsible for academic management, recognize that their institutions have engaged in curricular review and updating processes, but they relate them to permanent processes and not to specific or cyclical processes such as QA. They also consider that these changes are the result of their own and their institution’s decisions, as part of their commitment to a quality culture and not necessarily due to external motivation. It is clear that the cause behind these processes cannot be isolated, and as is to be expected, authorities whose direct responsibility is training quality, tend to reduce the influence of QA, both in its internal and external components.

Teaching staff link curricular changes to the development of self-assessment processes. For them, the adjustments are to a great extent the result of self-assessment, of the demands of quality assurance criteria, of the

implementation of improvement plans after self assessment or accreditation. Likewise, they express their discontent when this change is related to an accreditation refusal, as is the case in Portugal.

For students, the origin of changes is irrelevant. In general, they perceive adjustments are being made in this area, and consider them reasonably positive.

Institutional authorities, especially in Colombia and Costa Rica, link changes in the curriculum to changes in student profiles, the urgent need for fast and successful access to the labor market, speedy reaction to competition, and the use of technology.

It is important to state that different actors emphasize the co-existence of prior mechanisms or the development of other processes that affect these changes, which means that it is difficult to speak of a direct relationship to QA. Vice rectors and deans minimize the role of QA in these adjustments, whereas the heads of department and teaching staff clearly link the changes to accreditation processes: review against accreditation criteria, self-assessment processes, and the implementation of improvement plans.

All countries acknowledge that programs must respond to local external requirements, and institutions recognize that there is a certain pressure to align teaching with the environment. Hence while the information provided by graduate follow-up is an element that links QA to these changes, it is certainly not the only one. Thus, Colombian and Chilean respondents report that market forces are some of the most important influences in the push for change and increased linkages of study plans to the labor market. In Argentina, QA has forced updating, putting basic issues such as learning outcomes, curricula and study plans an essential part of the institutional agenda.

Changes in the definition of expected learning outcomes appear strongly in countries Colombia, Costa Rica, and Chile. Chile and Mexico also emphasize the formulation of competency based curricula. The situation in Portugal and Spain is different, since in these cases curricular change is linked to Bologna and not to QA mechanisms (which, in any case, ensure curricula alignment to Bologna provisions).

It is interesting to note that accreditation exerts a certain prescriptive influence on curricular change, as this is an aspect all QA agencies take into consideration. Accreditation processes promote or speed-up modifications to the curriculum and expected learning outcomes, even requiring them to be explicitly stated. They add urgency to an important task, often postponed if there is no external pressure. This situation also results in criticism of QA processes and the fact that, to be accredited it is necessary to adapt the curriculum to what is required by QA criteria; in this scenario, and in countries such as Mexico, there is some criticism about the little room left for differentiation.

### *3.3.2. Analysis of information about progression and achievement*

This is a key aspect in all countries; at the faculty level, it is recognized as an issue of constant concern.

Assessment focused basically on the quality of information, how it has evolved, and on the improvement actions derived from such information. All countries report that QA makes visible the information about student progression and achievement, and places it at an important level.

It is clear that QA has made it necessary to have more and better information about student progression and achievement, but once again it is not possible to isolate its level of incidence. It is a complex process, where other elements intervene.

The actors most directly involved in teaching, heads of department and academic staff, point out that attrition is a highly complex process, where it is impossible to control all intervening variables, and that must be addressed through many improvement actions. They further state the various institutional strategies do not cover all dimensions of the phenomenon. It is striking, however, given the relevance of attrition, that no respondent tries to place the situation at his/her university within a national or institutional context. The issue of timely graduation, although it is mentioned, does not appear among action priorities, which mostly focus on avoiding attrition.

Examples of the diversity of improvement actions mentioned in order to favor retention are:

- Higher entry requirements
- Tutorials
- Curricular flexibility
- Courses organized by semester, and offered every semester
- Reduced section sizes (small classes)
- Psychological advice and guidance for students
- Grants and socio-economic aid
- Increase in resources for support and teaching materials
- Preparatory and introduction courses (e.g. contents, study practices)
- Specialized teachers for certain types of studies
- Early follow-up and monitoring, and so on.

Deans report that, in spite of increasingly available information and the implementation of many associated improvement actions, the results of these actions and their impact is unknown.

Faculty members have a different view. They consider that the various strategies implemented have actually led to improvements in learning outcomes, which are evident in the reduction of fail rates, and better levels of employability, higher wages, and better jobs. In the case of Chile, they highlight

the impact of competency based training, thanks to which “professional training has improved”.

In Argentina, and to a lesser extent in Colombia, although it is clear that actions have been implemented to improve learning outcomes and teaching methodologies have also improved, the actual problems arise from poor secondary education, socio-economic problems, and the apathy of students, all of which have created a feeling of stagnation among teachers during the last decade.

Support for students with academic difficulties is critical in all countries. In addition, some countries such as Argentina and Mexico, report that due to a lack of reliable information, the problem is even more complex, since it is impossible to measure its magnitude.

At the national level, the only public information system mentioned is SPADIES in Colombia (*Sistema de Prevención y Análisis de la Deserción en las Instituciones de Educación Superior*), which has been designed to follow-up on attrition levels.

In the review of this dimension, assessment focused mainly on the quality of information, its evolution, and on the improvement actions derived from such information. Although it is recognized that external QA processes have improved the quantity and quality of information about student progression and achievement, other processes have also been involved, and therefore, the influence of QA mechanisms can only be described as indirect.

The end result is that even though there is more available information, and several associated improvement actions have been implemented, their impact and the results of these actions is unknown. There was not information leading to a public/private differentiation.

### ***3.3.3. Assessment of learning***

Assessment of learning, even when perceived as a key issue from the viewpoint of QA, has only recently started to be addressed institutionally. Normally, it responds to initiatives by teachers and there is little evidence of effective progress.

Respondents mention a wide range of ways of assessing learning, some derived from national policies, such as national tests (Saber Pro in Colombia), others responding to institutional initiatives such as teacher training, institutional tests, monitoring systems, information systems, definition of competencies, use of rubrics, exit tests, and so on.

Changes in forms of assessment either follow national policies or are perceived as individual initiatives; they may develop by the individual initiative of faculty



members, who develop new ways of assessing learning (in this case, the university just offers some training), or by the definition of institutional policies and practices to be implemented by all faculty.

Heads of department, and faculty see more clearly the impact in this dimension. Perception of connection between change and QA is clearer in countries such as Colombia, Costa Rica, and Chile and less clear in Spain, Portugal, Argentina, and Mexico.

Students, for their part, although they recognize progress, describe it as small and modest.

### *3.3.4. Teaching strategies*

This is a key aspect from the viewpoint of QA, and which has in general received much attention by participating universities. Changes in strategies, models, and teaching practices were explored.

Deans, heads of department and faculty members clearly perceive changes. They indicate there is certain progress, both due to institutional initiative and to that of faculty members themselves.

Reported changes in teaching strategies are diverse; some are associated to basic matters, such as the acquisition of course reading materials, the improvement of teaching and learning resources, infrastructure, and so on; others focus on innovations, such as the introduction of ICT to teaching or the implementation of new teaching methodologies.

In the view of the various respondents, QA would appear to have positively influenced changes of the first type (basic) and, at least, fostered changes of the second type (innovation). While external authorities perceive a clear link to QA, internal authorities and faculty members consider this link is less clear.

Once again, and as has been already mentioned in all issues related to the assessment of the management of teaching, changes are recognized and positively appreciated, but there is little evidence of the results obtained.

Students report changes in this regard, although in their view they are relatively small.

This aspect reveals differences in perception among academics at public and private universities. Whereas at public universities (usually larger and more complex) these changes tend to occur in the classroom at the initiative of faculty members, at private universities (smaller and less complex) these changes are promoted by centralized administration.

Associated to this last point, in some countries (and some universities) the factor of academic freedom plays a certain role, since teaching strategies, although they can be externally driven and promoted by the central administration, are the responsibilities of academics as such.

## 4. Conclusions

The study identified regularities in the perception of actors consulted in relation to all three specified dimensions. Special mention was made about progress in information systems, their value for the professionalization of university management and increasing recognition of teaching as a priority institutional function.

At the system level, main reports referred to changes in the institutionality of QA, the value of information for decision making, and the new role of the State in higher education and its relationship to institutions.

With regard to institutional management, one of the most significant changes is the establishment of a managerial style of decision making, which recognizes and values the results of the assessments carried out within the QA framework as an important input for institutional planning. A second major issue is the increased recognition of teaching as key function of universities, which in turn affects assessment and faculty development.

In terms of the teaching learning process, the study clearly shows that students and faculty see changes in teaching, associated to program accreditation. Although there are many factors involved, QA is perceived as a driver of change in curricular design and planning, teaching-learning processes, and associated methodologies and practices.

The study not only revealed positive changes and aspects, but also made it possible to identify certain difficulties common to the various countries involved, which lead to recommendations on adjustments to QA policies.

Before detailing findings by dimension, it is useful to consider certain aspects related to different perceptions linked to the role of the respondents:

- First, government authorities show considerable lack of knowledge about the characteristics and reach of QA processes, although they do recognize QA as an instrument of major importance in the current context of higher education.
- University leaders tend to value internal QA, associating it to the changes in priorities of their institutional leadership, and therefore, to their own decisions which would not always be driven nor influenced by QA public policy. Hence their focus is on internal quality assurance; they also have reservations about external quality assurance, when the latter is seen as a barrier to institutional differentiation and innovation.
- Department and program respondents show the greater appreciation of QA standards and practices and of their contribution both to the achievement of

program goals and to the improvement of the service rendered. In their view, QA has significantly affected institutional culture in favor of quality. The clarity of their opinion with regard to the various dimensions involved not only reflects their in-depth knowledge of the mezzo and micro dimensions, but also highlights that it is precisely at these levels where QA and accreditation systems have the greatest impact, although this is not always sufficiently appreciated.

Finally, it is important to mention that although there were some differences in results between public and private universities there were some findings, these were not significant in terms of the most important changes and impacts in the dimensions considered.

## **In summary**

Summarizing the main findings in each dimension, it is possible to state that:

### **Macro Dimension: Higher Education System**

1. One of the most important conclusions regarding the system as a whole is the modification of its institutionality in favor of including QA. On the one hand, the government recognizes in QA a new mechanism to exercise its regulatory function, although this is mainly carried out through incentive mechanisms for institutions. On the other hand, although there are some critical views regarding a possible loss of autonomy of the universities that undergo QA mechanisms, the changes in their own organizational structures reflect that QA has been incorporated permanently to institutional management.
2. Respondents in all countries agree that quality assurance standards positively contribute to the development of higher education. QA institutionalization is valued, in spite of certain difficulties and limitations. It is the intermediary authorities that most clearly see the changes in this dimension and, in general, these are perceived firmly associated to accreditation.
3. Therefore it is important to maintain and strengthen program assessment and accreditation, since it is here where the greatest impact is appreciated, especially when QA mechanisms involve students and faculty members. Program accreditation makes it easier to implement the changes identified as necessary —after internal and external assessment processes— and to make them visible to academic communities.
4. When QA systems make no distinction between public and private institutions, certain critical voices were raised coming from State universities, which complain that they are being placed in identical

conditions of competition with institutions that are far from the traditional nature of higher education.

5. A common feature is the increasing importance assigned to having more and better information, and to the need to regulate the information provided to the general public; the need to design these systems in accordance to the requirements of different users and to regulate advertising were important aspects frequently mentioned.
6. It is striking that on assigning responsibilities for timely delivery of information that is valid, accessible, and transparent, various actors focus their answers on the government and not on the universities. While there is public awareness of the importance of the quality of higher education and the critical role played by information in order to make decisions regarding higher education, the government must vouch for the information received by future students and their families; it is a role that appears strongly and that public policies linked to QA should raise and emphasize.

### **Mezzo Dimension: Institutional Management**

1. One of the most evident changes to organizational structures is the institutionalization of a new organizational component, usually under a team of non academic technicians and professionals, responsible for the design, control, and planning of QA processes and also gathering the information used for decision making.
2. The increased acknowledgement of teaching as a key function of universities is recognized as one of the biggest changes, which is also linked to changes in faculty assessment and development policies and practices. Also observed is the establishment of a managerial and bureaucratic style in decision making. Although there is a certain mix in its appreciation, this is a style criticized especially by mid level leaders and academics.
3. The establishment of information systems is perceived as a result of QA. There is consensus in that QA accompanies the establishment of information systems within higher education institutions.
4. Many respondents mention the increased use of information for institutional management, and its impact on participation. However, this is not equally true of all institutional actors, and there is evidence of mistrust in terms of the use other HEIs make of the information provided.

A shared expectation refers to the positive effect the integration of information systems could have regarding access and relevance. Respondents also seem to feel that if more, and more detailed information is available, academic and institutional management would improve.

These opinions show this is an aspect that still requires further work in various countries, mostly in terms of which is the really useful information, and what are the priority areas where it should be used.

Institutional information systems essentially serve institutional and academic management. Hence it is top authorities (academic vice rectors, directors of planning, and deans) who most clearly see the benefit of having these systems, probably due to their managerial responsibilities.

For their part, professional associations and academics question their validity, reliability, and usefulness. Although they do recognize progress in this sphere, they do not always perceive the usefulness. On the contrary, they consider themselves subject to increasing bureaucratic pressure to report data, without seeing an equivalent compensation in terms of information that responds to their needs.

5. Important changes were observed in the management of the academic body, mainly focused on the criteria and practices applied to selection and hiring, which include the establishment of more demanding requirements and the development of more competitive and transparent recruitment practices.

Linked to the above, QA has also involved increasing pressure with regard to the number and credentials of the faculty body.

### **Micro Dimension: Teaching Learning Process**

1. On issues referring to the level of teaching provided, the different respondents recognize important changes in terms of updating the definition of expected learning outcomes and curricular design; the consideration of information about student achievement and follow-up, and teaching strategies, methodologies, and practice. These changes are mentioned in practically all countries and the attributed value is in general very positive, although there is still little evidence of the results obtained. It is the mid level leaders, academics, and students that most appreciate changes in this regard.
2. Teaching is a key QA issue. Hence it is striking that it is essentially the internal actors at institutions that most appreciate this dimension, while the leaders of the QA agencies give it a mostly formal approach. Critical issues such as graduation profiles (learning outcomes), competency based curricula, student achievement and follow-up, and curricular innovation, among others, are matters that require flexibility and substantive assessment, and in many cases, the perception is that some agencies treat these issues in a standard and procedural way.

3. There is consensus in that information about student progression and achievement has become of key importance in teaching management, thanks to the development of QA and accreditation. Nevertheless, opinions also coincide in that changes in this dimension do not come from the agencies but the institutions themselves, especially because of the complexities associated to these issues.
4. With regard to changes in teaching strategies and practice, QA would appear to have directly and positively influenced changes associated to certain basic issues, such as acquiring required course reading materials and the regularization of the resources and materials necessary for teaching; it also has indirectly influenced other relevant matters such as changes associated to innovation, introduction of ICTs to teaching, capacity building, new teaching and assessment methodologies, good practices, and so on.

## Some recommendations

Acceptance of the accountability culture by higher education institutions would not be possible if, the different countries and as part of the development phase of QA systems, had not considered the involvement and participation of the academic world in defining standards and procedures; if clear guidance had not been provided for internal assessment; if after formulating improvement plans these were not linked to specific internal actions and, usually, incentives as well; if there had not been socialization of the importance of having appropriate and relevant information for decision making and critical indicators for the teaching-learning process, among other actions.

Nevertheless, analysis of the various opinions gathered during this study show these systems require constant review, building on the experience acquired and re-enchanting the various institutional levels with QA. It cannot be ignored that criticism of bureaucratization and the deficient training of peer reviewers, among others, is a risk that could de-legitimize the processes and decisions adopted.

Therefore it is important to strengthen these systems. Since program accreditation shows the clearest impact, and its usefulness is most evident, agencies should focus their attention here, either directly or in combination with institutional assessment practices.

Proposing QA as part of the higher education system is not by chance, not only because different actors interact intra and inter-institutionally, but also because various public policy mechanisms affect institutional management and the decisions made by these actors, sometimes in anticipated ways, others in an unforeseen and undesired way. Therefore it is important, at the level of government authorities and national agencies, to review the various public

policy instruments which affect QA, assess their level of alignment, and make the necessary corrections.

As the importance of having clear, timely, and relevant information is recognized across-the-board, it is necessary for countries to implement mechanisms favoring greater dissemination and transparency of the procedures and outcomes of the accreditation decisions adopted by national agencies. Seeking mechanisms to make information about accreditation accessible and understandable by public opinion is a priority, but it should also be kept in mind that these mechanisms should consider regulation of advertising and, especially, guidance to the different users.

To achieve the objective mentioned above, public information systems should be developed focusing on the different users. QA should promote better systematization of available information, easy access, and more timely communication. Likewise, these systems should find a balance between the requirements made to institutions and the usefulness, timeliness, and wealth of the information they receive.

The credibility of agencies, in general, is not questioned and it is directly associated to the stringency of their procedures, the coherence between criteria and decisions, and the backing given by connection to the academic world. Nevertheless, in those countries where it is unclear which is the institution responsible for ensuring quality (basically those where specialized agencies for program accreditation are in operation) there is greater questioning of the QA system. At the same time, the excessive formalization and bureaucracy of processes is the cause of significant criticism, which could affect achievements at system level. This is a warning that agencies should consider.

In those countries where national and specialized agencies coexist, it is important to assess whether both systems should be maintained, or the conditions under which it could be done. One key issue is to define clear standards for assessing and controlling their performance, as well as ensuring the consistency of their decisions and rigorous application of procedures and standards. One of the most harmful scenarios is that where there is a perception of bad practices derived from their competition and conflicts of interest, absence of academic authority, and bias and arbitrariness.

A general recommendation, based on an opinion widely stated, refers to the need to broadly increase space for participation by higher education institutions and the academic world in defining, developing, and updating standards, criteria, and procedures of national agencies.

Constant liaison between the agency and the academic world is an aspect to be worked on. Not only due to the legitimacy it gives the agencies and the decisions adopted, but also because universities demand greater—and more permanent—consideration when defining standards and procedures

(regulatory framework) and, especially, during the phase when the system is being consolidated, when it is absolutely necessary to correct undesired effects and improve QA standards, procedures, and mechanisms.

Criticism of the preparation, relevance, training, and knowledge of peer reviewers is also overarching. It is evident from the opinions gathered that the review and strengthening of mechanisms for the selection, training, and evaluation of reviewers is a priority task for agencies.

Teaching is an issue highlighted by the various university respondents. This means that the focus of QA on teaching and learning must be improved, going far beyond an approach that gives priority to formal and procedural aspects. The need to avoid prescriptive influences of accreditation in relation to curricular changes; to review the links between the various components of the teaching learning process in the light of assessment criteria and the results obtained, are aspects that should be prioritized. To ensure quality in teaching and learning, without promoting curricular harmonization, would appear to be a complex challenge but the most important from the viewpoint of QA in the view of institutions.

### **Finally,**

Operation of the system requires participation by the higher education institutions. Thus, the relevance and effectiveness of incentives to maintain the interest of HEIs should be analyzed in depth, together with the consideration of the steps that need to be taken to consolidate a quality culture in the region.

The quality culture tends to fade if what prevails is complying with procedures over and above changes within institutions and, especially, programs. Having QA systems that are formally established and in operation has implied significant investment in terms of dedication, work, and time; in all countries there is recognition of its value and the consequences it has for institutions. Making the required changes, in order to improve QA schemes is a shared responsibility among government authorities, higher education institutions and, especially, agencies. Through the gathering of a wide range of opinions, the provision of contextual variables and opportunities for discussion and exchange, CINDA hopes to make a contribution and facilitate this task.



## REFERENCES

- Bornmann, L et al. (2006) Quality assurance in higher education meta-evaluation of multi-stage evaluation procedures in Germany. *Higher Education*, 52(4).
- Brennan, J. & Shah T. (2000) Quality assessment and institutional change: experiences from 14 countries. *Higher Education*, 40.
- González, L.E. (2008) *El impacto del proceso de evaluación y acreditación en las universidades de América Latina*. CINDA-IESALC/UNESCO.
- Harvey, L. & Green (1993) Defining quality. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 18(1).
- Horsburgh, M. (1999) Quality monitoring in higher education: the impact on student learning. *Quality in Higher Education*, 5(1).
- Lemaitre M.J. (2005) Aseguramiento de la calidad en Chile: impacto y proyecciones. En *Aseguramiento de la calidad: impacto y proyecciones*. Santiago de Chile: Serie Seminarios Internacionales, CSE.
- Mintzberg H. (1989) *Diseño de organizaciones eficientes*. Editorial El Ateneo. Buenos Aires.
- Mintzberg, H. (1979) *The structuring of organizations*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Newton, J. (2002) Views from below: academics coping with quality. *Quality in higher education*, 8(2).
- Silva, C. (2006) Aseguramiento de calidad en gestión de instituciones de educación superior: expectativas y desafíos. *Calidad en la Educación*, CSE N° 24.
- Stensaker, B. (2003) Trance, transparency and transformation: the impact of external quality monitoring in higher education. *Quality in Higher Education* 9.
- Stensaker, B. (2008) Outcomes of quality assurance: a discussion of knowledge, methodology and validity. *Quality in Higher Education*, 14(1).
- Vlasceanu, L., Grinberg, L, Parlea, D. (2007) *Quality Assurance and Accreditation: A Glossary of Basic Terms and Definitions*, UNESCO-CEPES, Bucharest.
- Westerheijden, D.F. (1999). Where are the quantum jumps in quality assurance?: developments of a decade of research on a heavy particle. *Higher Education* 38(2).

Zapata, G. & Tejeda, I (2009) Impactos del aseguramiento de la calidad y acreditación de la educación superior: consideraciones y proposiciones. *Calidad en la Educación*, CSE N° 31.