

Guest editorial: External evaluation of university quality in Latin America

Introduction

It may distress regular readers of *Quality Assurance in Education*, but neither the Spanish nor the Portuguese language offers a good translation of the concept of *accountability*. In Latin America, either we borrow the English word as if so preserving its export-grade powers, or we adjust the notion to less trusting native customs, as “rendering accounts” (Portuguese: *prestação de contas*; Spanish: *rendición de cuentas*). Certainly, Latin American universities will often assert their *autonomy*, sometimes in an institution’s very name. Perhaps we could consider *autonomía* and *autonomia* as Spanish and Portuguese equivalents of accountability? Indeed, autonomy is often proffered as a common and vital thread within Latin American academia (IESALC, 2018), although the aspirational nature of such claims has not gone unnoticed (Bernasconi, 2021). No, especially because so much effort goes into the celebration of autonomy, we immediately wonder to what extent institutions really have it and how wisely and fully their members are represented in the process. In Latin America, it may be best not to rely on professions of autonomy as guarantees of inspired academic values and high-quality experiences; from beyond the cloisters of a particular institution’s political machinations, we need accounts to be rendered even to begin to understand how well it is conducting higher education. In that spirit, this special issue consists of ranging accounts of different aspects of the various stages at which Latin American higher education systems find themselves in the already eventful 2020s.

Latin American countries have all taken their own routes in transitioning from selective and elite higher education systems to what Martin Trow (1973) would term mass higher education. Over recent decades, quality assurance measures have been adopted within Latin America, with external evaluation seeking to establish and uphold academic standards, often on the advice of funding organisations such as the World Bank (Woodhouse, 1996; Balbachevsky, 2021). As Beerkens (2015) notes, in line with World Bank policies, governance models worldwide (state, private and hybrid) exhibit increasing convergence along New Public Management lines, notwithstanding diversity between the specific rationales of higher education reforms in different systems. The special issue collates the quest for more dynamic and yet more orderly higher education throughout the region.

Whole-country analyses reflect systems responding to the opportunities and strictures that quality evaluation brings. María Jacqueline Rojas leads a team in giving an account of Chile’s relatively mature external evaluation system, while Juan Felipe Duque narrates a degree of vacillation and drift in the nature of Colombian accreditation; Martínez and Chiancone, meanwhile, provide a pioneering account (in English, at least) of Uruguay’s belated adoption of quality assurance protocols. Other authors identify blindspots in quality regimes. Danilo Costa uses approaches in Canada to map out relevant stakeholders for calibrating a better understanding of the quality of Brazilian universities, whereas Sophie Didou chronicles the trials and tribulations of Mexican



vocational institutions in gaining recognition under the country's evaluation approaches. Further studies document effects on individual institutions, whether in terms of New Public Management induced within them (Marquina and colleagues), the more open-ended conceit of entrepreneurial orientations (Almeida and team) or of the chance to harness the generous weighting of internationalisation within the concept of quality assurance to propel the concept institutionally (Ramirez-Valdivia and Latorre-Bahamondez).

Overall, these studies illustrate distinctive ways in which external quality assurance has made inroads into national regulatory frameworks. For some, it seems to have done little to alleviate problems and challenges attached to the evolution of higher education in Latin America. There is also disappointment in its contribution to the wider modernisation drives that have brought quality assurance schemes to the region in the first place. Yet it is difficult not to notice a shared and continuing belief among researchers and policymakers regarding the potential of external quality assurance arrangements for transforming higher education to the extent that the whole sector and individual institutions might master its underpinning logic.

This belief is, of course, grounded in reality. Quality assurance policies have a transformative and reorienting potential that needs to be carefully considered. As the implementation of accreditation shows across the region, it can serve varied agendas and interests – both within and beyond higher education. The proliferation of international networks of for-profit providers has seen accreditation channeled to secure mainstream funding sources and local respectability (Knight, 2020). Moreover, the palpable diversity exhibited between national higher education sectors across Latin America is testament to the contextual and structural conditions at play, and such conditions influence the functions that external quality assurance performs in local settings. A closer look at these factors may allow a better understanding of changing roles for external quality assurance at the national and regional levels. Latin America's higher education institutions and higher education systems lend themselves to fascinating accounts, and regulatory bodies are increasingly held accountable to the rising expectations of more higher education-savvy societies.

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