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UNIVERSITY EVALUATION POLICIES IN ARGENTINA: BALANCE AND CHALLENGES



Las políticas de evaluación universitaria en Argentina: balance y desafíos

As políticas de avaliação universitária na Argentina: balanço e desafios

RECIBIDO: 15 DE DICIEMBRE DE 2015

EVALUADO: 11 DE ABRIL DE 2016

APROBADO: 20 DE MAYO DE 2016

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en

ABSTRACT

This article aims to present some reflections regarding the tensions of university evaluation policies by highlighting four issues in this field that suggest complex relationships: evaluation and autonomy, evaluation and planning, evaluation and quality, and evaluation and social relevance. Likewise, we include some characteristics of evaluation and university certification field setup by making special reference to the case of the University of Buenos Aires. Finally, we suggest ideas to keep into account in future researches as well as revisions to this policy that has been implemented for more than two decades.

Keywords: Education, university evaluation, universities, education policy, institutional self-evaluation.

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RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es presentar algunas reflexiones sobre las tensiones de las políticas de evaluación universitaria, distinguiendo analíticamente cuatro cuestiones que atraviesan este campo y que plantean relaciones complejas: evaluación y autonomía, evaluación y planeamiento, evaluación y calidad, evaluación y pertinencia social. Asimismo, se incluyen algunas características de la conformación del campo de la evaluación y acreditación universitaria, haciendo especial referencia al caso de la Universidad de Buenos Aires. Finalmente, se plantean consideraciones para futuras investigaciones y revisiones de esta política, tras dos décadas de implementación.

Palabras clave: Educación, evaluación universitaria, universidades, política educativa, autoevaluación institucional.

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RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar algumas reflexões sobre as tensões das políticas de avaliação universitária, distinguindo analíticamente quatro questões que atravessam este campo e que apresentam relações complexas: avaliação e autonomia, avaliação e planejamento, avaliação e qualidade, avaliação e pertinência social. Mesmo assim, incluem-se algumas características da conformação do campo da avaliação e acreditação universitária, fazendo especial referência ao caso da Universidade de Buenos Aires. Finalmente, apresentam-se considerações para futuras pesquisas e revisões desta política, depois de duas décadas de implementação.

Palavras chave: Educação, avaliação universitária, universidades, política educativa, auto avaliação institucional.

Panorama | **PARA CITAR ESTE ARTÍCULO / TO CITE THIS ARTICLE / PARA CITAR ESTE ARTIGO:**
Nosiglia, M. C. y Mulle, V. (2016). Las políticas de evaluación universitaria en Argentina: balance y desafíos. Panorama 10(19), p. 33-44.

Volumen 10 | **DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.15765/pnrm.v12i22.1142>

Número 19 |

Julio-diciembre

2016 |

INTRODUCTION

Educational assessment was one of the most outstanding policies of the 1990s in Argentina. This issue was present on neoliberal policies agenda at all educational levels, and was associated with a broader issue: concern for quality education. The political orientations in this area implied the need for inter-institutional competition, institutions and teachers had to have a greater share of responsibility for the results and there had to be accountability mechanisms in place to guarantee it.

In Argentinian universities, the introduction of institutional assessment mechanisms and the accreditation of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees was established in 1995 with the Law of Higher Education 24521.

This policy was one of the most controversial of the 1990s - along with others, such as incentives for research teachers - and at the same time it had a great impact on the academic culture of institutions. It generated the need to modify the curriculum, the infrastructure and, to some extent, affected the academic career as such. The impact can be measured both with respect to its permanence and its territorial reach, which covers the national, regional and international.

Most of the university institutions in Argentina initially questioned and resisted the new regulations, since, on the one hand, they were considered as an attack on the autonomy side of the issue, insofar as it subjected the institutional and academic practices of the universities to a standards-based assessment process led by an external agency; and on the other hand, there was

fear of introducing a market logic, based on the rating of the universities' "products" in order to provide consumers with information and provoke inter-institutional competition.

However the Law was gradually accepted with the incentive policies implemented by the Secretariat for University Policies, the contents of the judicial rulings pertaining the unconstitutionality of the Law of Higher Education - most universities lost their case- and through the institutions' adaptation to this policy, and also, a significant number of teachers and researchers participated as peer evaluators in the implementation of these processes.

Most of the universities were involved in these processes, either by adherence to this policy or in order to obtain symbolic and material incentives, or with a critical acceptance. Although this position enjoys a certain stability, some sectors still continue to actively reject it, mainly the student associations.

The objective of this paper is to present some thoughts on the tensions of university assessment policies and to analytically distinguish four issues that encompass this field and which posit complex relationships: assessment and autonomy, assessment and planning, assessment and quality, assessment and social relevance.

We also include some characteristics of the formative phase of the university assessment and accreditation field in Argentina, with special reference to the case of the University of Buenos Aires. Finally, after two decades of implementing university assessment mechanisms in this context, we posit thoughts for a future assessment of this policy.



RECENT TRENDS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

As an introduction to the theoretical questions that will be discussed later on, this section will briefly characterize some recent trends in the higher education system, which actually describe the scenario in which the assessment policies are implemented.

In a recent study, Brunner and Villalobos (2014) analyze higher education trends in Ibero-America and observe the main one to be the growth of enrollment at this level. Following a sustained growth trend since the 1970s, during the last five years (2005-2011), student population has increased from 18.4 million to almost 25 million. In many countries of the Latin American region, this growth was mainly absorbed by the private sector, and educational offerings of variable quality. In some countries, private sector enrollment far exceeds that of the public sector.

In Latin America, there are 15,214 higher education institutions, of which 24% are universities or equivalent organizations (69% are privately run) and 76% are non-university institutions (Brunner and Villalobos, 2014).

In Argentina, both the public and private sectors have grown since the 1990s, with a trend towards the deregulation of private university offerings and more recently with the creation of more than a dozen public universities. Currently in Argentina,

we have 135 university institutions and 2213 non-university higher education institutions.¹ Between 1995 and 2015, the number of universities grew more than 60%, and the growth of public institutions (81%) was greater than that of private institutions (51%) for the whole period. In the last decade 17 new national universities and 7 private universities were created.

Beyond the particular development of each sector as regards the number of institutions, the total number of public and private universities is similar;² however, university enrollment is mainly concentrated in the public sector (79%), while only 21% attend private establishments. This distribution of enrollment by sectors has been similar during the last twenty years, although in relative terms, private enrollment growth was greater than public enrollment.

On the other hand, institutions have diversified. In the first place, due to the functions that universities perform, most of them only teach, and lesser part are dedicated to research and teaching. Secondly, because the academic offerings are varied, some greatly emphasize in postgraduate education and others exclusively serve undergraduate and graduate education. Third, due to their profiles, some are elite and others promote the inclusion of recent high school graduates, who are the first generation of family members attending college.

Likewise, the supply of postgraduate degrees increased. In Argentina, its number tripled in just

Panorama |
pp. 33-44 |

Volumen 10 |

Número 19 |
Julio-diciembre

2016 |

¹ The data for university institutions comes from the rules for the creation of institutions and corresponds to 2015, while information of non-university higher education institutions corresponds to 2014 and comes from the statistical yearbook prepared by the National Directorate of Information and Assessment of Educational Quality published in 2015.

² In the case of university institutions, 51% are public institutions and the rest are private. If you look at the sector of non-university higher education institutions, the distribution varies a little: the public sector concentrates 46% of institutions, while 54% are private.

two decades.³ This growth occurred, initially, with few State regulations. The expansion of postgraduate programs responds to the need of permanently being up to date and greater demands placed on teachers' academic career.

There were also changes in teaching and learning modes, which involved a progressive passage from conventional modes of teaching, centered on expository in-classroom courses, to new modes promoted by an experimental field that promotes use of information and communications technologies (ICT), which implies new teaching practices, new spaces and learning concepts, new forms of organization, communications and knowledge management and new links with occupations and daily life.

Another trend in the higher education system is that it is being increasingly internationalized, which is evidenced in the growing flow of international student mobility, in the increased number of exchange student and interactions among academics and researchers from different parts of the world through global networks, in the standardized convergence of programs and careers and in selling transnational higher education services. Some indicators that evidence these trends are the number of international students, mutual recognition agreements, the number of university networks and associations that have been created, as well as the different mobility programs and academic cooperation agreements. Finally, the transnational supply of higher education, supported by the opportunities offered by ICTs, also generated new institutional formats with massive educational offerings, developed entirely under the virtual modality.

Ultimately, as a substratum of all the changes herein described, the relationship between the State, society and the universities has been transformed, and this constitutes one of the cornerstones for installing university assessment mechanisms, which are based on what some authors call the construction of a "new social contract" between universities and the state (Brunner, 1993). This new agreement means replacing the State's weak administrative control with the assessment, a change of criteria when allocating public resources, based on agreed objectives and goals and a commitment on the part of the universities to diversify their funding sources.

The passage from the benevolent state to the evaluating state (Neave and Van Vught, 1991) is part of a broader public reform that is grounded in the theory of New Public Management. This perspective assumes a competitive view of institutions that affects the way in which the governance of higher education systems and institutions is defined (Dobbins, Knill and Vögtle, 2011, Kretek, Dragsic and Kehm, 2013). In order to adapt themselves to this scenario of interinstitutional competition, universities require a more hierarchical and professional institutional management, greater organizational efficiency and a greater degree of public accountability.

In summary, the trends observed, as well as the policies promoted, created a scenario in which the processes of university assessment and accreditation were developed and are still being developed.

Although the initial resistance generated by these processes has now been overcome, university

assessment is not without its tensions. Some of them are discussed below.

TENSIONS IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND ASSESSMENT

The analysis of the tensions that exist in the proposed university assessment policies distinguishes four issues that encompass this field and have a complex relationships: assessment and autonomy, assessment and planning, assessment and quality, assessment and social relevance.

The definition of these issues includes problems of a different nature: some are antinomies (contradictions between two rational principles), others are dilemmas (alternatives to a situation that occur simultaneously) or false premisses (statements that are considered certain but lead to error).

ASSESSMENT AND AUTONOMY

Both autonomy and assessment are polysemic terms and it is necessary to state what each one means.

Assessment is understood as the process of collecting information and using it to generate value judgments. The assessment units can be of a very diverse nature: from the educational system, to an institution, to the actors involved in the educational process: students and teachers. In addition, following Camilloni (2004), the assessment can have different objectives: it can be a diagnosis, when one wants to know the causes of a certain phenomenon; preventive, when it collects information against a hypothetical situation in order to prevent it; prospective - all assessments are

partly so - when the information and judgments of a current situation are used to make predictions about the future; it can be summative when it takes the results of a process and analyzes whether it was right or wrong; or formative, when something is in an on going process and we collect information in order to establish corrective measures so as to improve the outcome. It can also be regulatory, when analyzing a particular situation it helps to take the necessary corrective measures or to keep going forward; it can also justify or accredit, for example, when an external group is going to receive information about something and issue a public value judgment. There is also an assessment of cost-effectiveness, which relates used resources and obtained results (Camilloni, 2004). In addition, the purpose of the assessment differs according to what you expect to produce (for example, recommendations, directives, explanations or different points of view within the academic community,) and according to the actors that perform it (external or self-assessment or a combination of both).

On the other hand the definition of university autonomy is complex due to the historicity of a concept that harkens back to medieval ages and university "fueros", it's the sphere of protection against arbitrary power, and also due to its different legal interpretations and its different applicable dimensions (institutional, academic, financial and administrative).

Historically in Argentina, the scope and limitations of university autonomy have had a legal basis, that is, they were subjected to the characteristics established by the laws that emanated from the Congress and anything it mandated. This changed in 1994 because the principles of autonomy and

autarchy were incorporated in the National Constitution as guarantees for the national universities.

Although university assessment and autonomy are not opposing terms in themselves, they come into tension when an agent external is given the function of evaluating the university itself and in accordance to criteria constructed by other agencies.

Precisely with the promulgation of the Law of Higher Education 24521 in 1995, university assessment and accreditation processes were systematically introduced throughout the higher education system. These processes are performed by the National Commission for University Assessment and Accreditation (Coneau), a decentralized agency, which operates under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and whose main functions are to coordinate and perform the universities external assessment, evaluate the institutional projects of new public and private universities and accredit undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

In a recent study, Araújo (2015) rightly points out that two assessment approaches coexist in Argentina: on the one hand, a comprehensive approach focused on the recognition of the particularities of the organizations' institutional projects, evidenced in institutional assessments; on the other hand, a comparative approach, which is evidenced in the accreditation of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, to the extent that each educational offering - which complied with these processes - has its careers compared to external

benchmarks, through previously defined criteria or standards.

From one point of view it can be argued that the principle of university autonomy is safeguarded, since, both accreditation and external assessment reports are based on self-assessments carried out by the institutions themselves; and, both processes are based on the assessments of academic peers (teachers and researchers from universities that specialize in the pertinent disciplines). Likewise, in relation to the institutional assessment, there are no technical standards or patterns to which universities must adjust themselves and whose non-compliance could generate a reprimand or condemnation. The assessment focuses on assessing the university's idiosyncrasy. Different authors coincide in pointing out that external assessment, given its holistic and sociohistorical approach, is a process that contributes to viewing the institution as a whole, beyond the multiple disciplinary cultures that comprise it and in this sense, lessens the actors' perception of the university as a federation or set of faculties (Araújo, 2015, Stubrin, 2014).

Degree accreditation is based on the application of certain quality standards. The standards are approved by the Ministry of Education based on the recommendation of the Council of Universities,⁴ as regulations dictate, but they are based on proposals elaborated by the universities themselves through dean or faculty associations and preapproved by the National Interuniversity Council (comprised of the rectors of national universities). Also, the roster of experts from which the Coneau designates the peer committees that

⁴ The Council of Universities is comprised of the rectors of national universities, rectors of private universities and the Minister of Education, who chairs.

issue opinions, is elaborated and based on the proposals of the universities.

From another perspective, some have argued that the institutional assessment processes were biased to those issues that were supposed to be evaluated, and information was presented in a way that hid or reduced possible criticisms about problematic issues with regard to the institutions. In the case of graduate course accreditations, some argue that it led to the homogenization of the curricula and that the intrusion of corporations in the establishment of extensive reserved activities led to an expansion of subjects and contents.

Research on the impact of institutional assessment and accreditation processes for undergraduate and postgraduate courses is still scarce and should extend to new institutions and degrees, by carrying out empirically grounded comparisons.

Behind these issues, a tension coexists between the freedom of universities to define different aspects of their institutional life (academic, administrative, etc.) and the role of the State in ensuring public interest by regulating the activity of these establishments.

ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING

The relationship between assessment and planning is partly evident, since planning seems unworkable if it does not start from some sort of assessment. In general, assessment is conceived as a management tool linked to institutional planning processes, intended to contribute to improvement.

But also, from the perspective of some agencies, institutional planning can be considered an

indicator for the assessment of higher education quality. Specifically, the Interuniversity Development Center considers that quality assessment would be possible to the extent that university institutions formulate their institutional project and their short, medium and long-term plans required to meet their goals. This perspective is based on the idea that quality is relative and

that the institution establishes the benchmark when it defines what it will do, that is, when it defines its mission, objectives, goals and strategies, even in cases when it will be necessary to comply with certain aspects of the demands established by external agents (Interuniversity Development Center, 1994, p.44).

As Stubrin points out in a paper that analyzes the relationships between autonomy, planning and public policy,

the formulation and execution of plans is used to counteract or overcome some typical vices into which any administration can fall: first, traditionalism, a mode of action that perpetuates the past; secondly, routinization, a reproduction of practices whose original meaning has been forgotten; and finally, the "perpetual present", understood as the tendency to live on a day to day basis, regardless of any thoughts on both the past and the future (2014, 51).

In this sense, the university assessment could contribute to planning at two levels: at the university system level, it could contribute if the State uses the information provided by the assessments to guide public policies according to fixed objectives; and, in each university, based on the self-assessment and the external assessment reports and the university planning recommendations included therein.

Assessment policies seem to contain the potential to operate in favor of planning, if the universities apply them to their internal decision-making, and at the inter-institutional level by using the systemic coordination mechanisms. However, the links and feedback between these processes are not highly developed, especially the interinstitutional.

ASSESSMENT AND QUALITY

As mentioned above, university assessment is a concept that is embedded within a broader political discussion, whose focus is on quality. The topic of quality was always present in the discussion of academic policies applied to the university community, especially from the point of view of the teachers and their teaching and research tasks, with little intervention from external actors. Since the 1990s quality is associated with assessment at all levels of education. This was also promoted by the intervention of national and international agencies that developed tests in order to evaluate learning or competences (such as the PISA [Program for International Student Assessment]), whose results usually have important repercussions in the mass media and put pressure on Governments.

However, the concept of quality is polysemic and multidimensional. In this sense, its relative character is traversed by the actors that define it, the historical moment in which it takes place, the geographic space in which it is located and the ideological currents it uses to position itself. It is an essentially political concept, since it arises from the interests of different actors subordinated to ethical-political conceptions. The meanings happen in a social space where power disputes take place. Consequently, the way the university is conceived has a direct influence on how we think

about quality, how to achieve it, how to improve it and how to guarantee it.

Therefore, the concept of quality is a social construction, which varies according to the interests of groups within and outside the educational institution, and this evidences the characteristics of the society that is desired for today and projected for the future. It is not a univocal and fixed concept, but must be constructed through consensus and negotiations between the actors (Dias Sobrihno, 2003).

The idea of quality refers to different issues depending to the actors that define it: for the academic community it refers to knowledge; for employers, competences; for students, employability; for society, respectable and competent citizens; for the State, according to the conception it assumes, it can vary from aspects related to social and human development to efficiency, costs and human capital requirements (Fernández Lamarra, 2008).

As can be seen beyond different definitions, there is a consensus that the higher education quality must include and articulate the visions and demands of different actors, with the values and purposes of university institutions and society.

The type of assessment and university accreditation that Argentina developed, initially responded to the control assessment model, including the accreditation of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees that include a qualification. However, following the first rounds of evaluating and accrediting institutions and degrees, there was a need to develop new policy instruments to help improve quality and overcome problems identified

in the assessment processes, new policy instruments had to be developed in order to assure quality through special programs and funds (Nosiglia, 2008).

As assessment was associated with quality improvement, the idea of quality was also linked to the concept of relevance as one of the challenges the universities had to face as part of the sector's agenda promoted by some international organizations (Unzué, 2014). However, this association is not necessarily obvious, since there may be quality activities that are not relevant, and relevant activities that do not meet the minimum quality requirements. Below we will discuss the tension between assessment and social relevance.

ASSESSMENT AND SOCIAL RELEVANCE

Assessment was associated to relevance because, as several authors argue, assessment should produce meanings about how educational institutions are educating an integral human being and producing important knowledge as their social function, so as to solve the problems of the community and help construct the nation (Dias Sobrinho, 2012).

The concept of relevance belongs to the organizational sphere and its role in the last decades is part of a broader transformation, which is linked to the redefinition of relations between society and the university.

institutional, systemic, disciplinary, etc. (Naidorf, Giordana and Horn, 2007).

The notion of higher education relevance (in French: *pertinence*, in Spanish: *pertinencia*) was introduced by UNESCO's specialized documents since 1995, and has been systematically reinforced since the occasion of the World Conference on Higher Education in the XXI century in 1998. The documents, define it as follows: "The relevance of higher education must essentially be considered in relation to its role and place in society, to its mission of providing education, research and the services ensuing therefrom, and also to its links with the world of work, in the broadest sense, its relationship with the state and with sources of public financing, and its interactions with the other levels and forms of education" (UNESCO 1998: 31).

The category of relevance used from this perspective tries to counter two aspects: on the one hand, the tendency towards the university institutions self-entrapment, favored by a too unilateral understanding of academic autonomy; and on the other hand, the tendency of an academic agenda to be defined from purely disciplinary parameters and, consequently, disconnected from realities and social contexts (local, national, regional or global).

From the 1980s and mainly from the 1990s, in both academic culture and in the assessment of university's social relevance, the axis shifted from the university's level of autonomous responsibility to a level of hybridization with society and the market. In this sense, responsibility has been transformed into *accountability*.

The different perspectives that refer to different and contradictory models of the university, also test different definitions of *relevance*.

From an economic approach a curriculum, a research or an institution complies with social relevance parameters when they respond to market demands, that is, profitability and efficient production.

From a social or comprehensive perspective, the activities that are carried out in the university are relevant when they can be linked and integrated with the society they are part of, and to which they contribute from their specific improvements to the living conditions, in a broad sense, of the masses, with a long-term vision and in a sustainable manner. In some circumstances, this is accomplished through the development of theoretical tools that permit the understanding and transformation of current conditions and rescue the value of epistemic pertinence.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FORMATION OF UNIVERSITY ASSESSMENTS IN ARGENTINA WITH REFERENCE TO THE UNIVERSITY OF BUENOS AIRES

In Argentina, the concern for the assessment and accreditation of the university system has a solid history towards the end of the 1980s. Some authors propose different stages in the formation of this field, depending on the political-academic positions adopted by the university institutions. In this sense, it is possible to distinguish three different moments in the structuring of this relation: 1) the universities have a critical stance

towards the assessment, initially as resistance and then as counterproposal, 2) the Executive Branch becomes hegemonic in the production of proposals and installs in the university a heteronomous regulation of the assessment mechanisms and 3) university institutions adopt the defined processes and the assessment and accreditation practices, and they are incorporated as routine processes (Mollis, 1999; Krotsch, 2001).

In a first instance between 1987 and 1992, a project between the Ministry of Education and Justice and the World Bank was implemented with the objective of promoting the funding of the coordination and management of national universities. In 1991, the Government signed an agreement with the National Interuniversity Council to implement the Program for the Strengthening of University Management and Coordination, known as Subproject 06, which contained a component related to quality assessment. This component was agreed and negotiated between the State and the universities.

In this period, the University of Buenos Aires also expressed concern about the assessment of quality education through the creation of various programs aimed at evaluating different components of academic activity. For example, in 1988, a program for the *Assessment of the volume and quality of the educational offering of the University of Buenos Aires was created in regards to society's demands*; later, at the initiative of the Secretariat for Academic Affairs, the university started to evaluate postgraduate programs; in 1991, a program was created to supervise and assess the training and perfecting of the staff responsible for managing teachers. And, in 1995, the university and the various aspects of academic life (curriculum,

research, extension and transfer and academic structure) were object of a reform, with the objective of raising the quality and relevance of the university's activities and contributions in line with new demands and social transformations, which was established in the document *Change Proposal for the University of Buenos Aires*, elaborated in Colón (Entre Ríos), that same year. The following problem arose in relation to university assessment: scarce comprehensive assessment of activities, the need to create instances and regulations for the assessment, and units of permanent managerial control so as to monitor and evaluate academic structures. These were discontinued in time, when some academic units decided to participate in the undergraduate and postgraduate accreditation process.

In the second instance, characterized by Executive Power, its hegemony and the heteronomous regulation of assessment mechanisms in the universities, began in 1993 with the creation of the Secretariat for University Policies, which entered into agreements with universities in order to carry out internal and external assessments. With the promulgation of the Law of Higher Education, a whole set of policies that were developing in the same direction, crystallized in a regulatory body. In the period immediately following the promulgation of the Law of Higher Education, the relationship between the national government and national universities was permeated by institutional resistance to the application of some provisions contained in the regulations. An example of this comes from the diverse legal claims that several universities filed,⁵ and one of the issues challenged

was the establishment of periodic assessment and accreditation processes and the creation of an external entity that was given the responsibility for carrying out said tasks. The rulings were adverse to the universities, except Judge Marinelli's decision in 1996, in the case of the University of Buenos Aires.

Judge Marinelli's ruling accepted the claim from the University of Buenos Aires that considered the Law of Higher Education partially unconstitutional. Among the articles considered unconstitutional are articles 42, 43 and subsection b of article 46 of the current Law on Higher Education, relating to qualifying degrees and their assessment and accreditation. In this way, the University of Buenos Aires was exempted from accrediting its undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

The third instance (1997-2013) was when the universities adopted the defined processes and the assessment and accreditation practices become routines. The study of the institutional practices incorporated in the assessment and accreditation process currently evidences that the assessment has been incorporated as a habitual practice, due to the instruments, procedures, times and political factors that encompass it.

The University of Buenos Aires's position changed over time. In 1997, the High Council issued a statement authorizing, in cases deemed convenient, that submissions of assessments and postgraduate accreditation degrees to Coneau was voluntarily, clarifying that this did not imply the waiver of in

Misiones, La Pampa, Salta, Río Cuarto, Mar del Plata, Tecnológica Nacional and the University of Buenos Aires.

⁵ These claims were made by the National Universities of Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, Entre Ríos, Luján, Rosario, Litoral, Córdoba, San Luis, San Juan, Catamarca, Jujuy,

force university autonomy, just because it was voluntary.⁶ This position changed in 2000, when this same body considered that they did not have the minimum guarantees so as to submit themselves to the dictates of the Coneau, in spite of the fact that multiple postgraduate degrees had already been accredited and assessed with the highest marks, and hence it resolved to suspend its submission before the Coneau. One year later, all academic units were allowed to attend the summons for the assessment and accreditation of postgraduate degrees.

Currently, and as a result of the changes of position as regards Coneau, the University of Buenos Aires has already accredited more than 234 postgraduate degrees and 10 undergraduate degrees, some of which have already been presented in the second summons for accreditation. However, it has not faced a comprehensive institutional assessment.

From a few recent changes, we can argue that we are currently witnessing a fourth period in which universities, within the National Interuniversity Council, have begun to discuss some aspects of the undergraduate degree accreditation process, they have specifically discussed the necessary criteria to define which of said degrees should be included in the accreditation list, because the activities carried out by their graduates pose a social risk. Likewise, they are debating criteria for the formulation of accreditation standards, as the intention is to generate effects on degrees and their corporations. Another non minor element refers to the emergence of the assessment of some functions of the universities parallel processes, such as the assessment of research promoted by the Ministry of Science and Technology. This initiative calls into

question the holistic sense of the universities institutional assessment.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Throughout these pages, some thoughts were raised about a set of tensions that we observed in university assessment policies. The issues addressed herein are considered center points in the context of current higher education policies. Concerns about quality, relevance, planning and effective and transparent management, the exercise of autonomy, are part of what Tunnermann (2010) has defined as a "new academic *ethos*" created within the recent university transformation processes.

Tyler and Bernasconi (1999) caution that one should bear in mind

That quality increase is a long-term phenomenon, which does not depend on the assessment system, but on the willingness and ability of institutions to improve. At best, it creates the conditions for universities to achieve excellence, stimulates them, guides them, presses them, rewards them or punishes them, so that they do not cease in their efforts, but the system cannot improve institutions without their own collaboration [...] assessment mechanisms that ignore the fact that the quality of the country's higher education depends on the quality of each of its institutions, are doomed to failure (1999, pp. 13-14).

From these reflections, we consider that it is necessary for the institutions and the university system as a whole to produce research pertaining the following questions: To what extent was institutional assessment incorporated as a systematic, permanent and necessary practice in order to strengthen the academic and institutional management of universities? How is the

⁶ Resolution (CS) No. 1380/97.

information produced by the assessment and accreditation processes used to formulate institutional and system-wide policies? To what extent do assessment processes continue to contribute to institutional improvements by contributing new elements, or have they become bureaucratic practices?

On the other hand, taking into account institutional planning and quality as a relative concept, is it possible to think of uniform models and instruments of assessment given the differences between the missions, functions and dimensions of institutions?

In recent decades quality assessment has probably been at the core of the university sector's policies at the regional level and especially in the Argentinian context. According to Dias Sobrinho (2007), the procedures carried out by governments and multilateral agencies have tended to define quality as the measurable demonstration of performance in graduating professionals, student performance, academic production from the academic community and other products that can be objectively quantified. However, the meaning and values (scientific, ethical, social, etc.) of the ideas, missions, visions, projects, process, impacts and relationships produced in the institutions and systems have not been questioned.

According to the author, "if values are not questioned, that is, meanings are not produced, assessment systems end up practicing only a quasi-assessment, not an assessment" (Dias Sobrinho, 2007, p. 322). As we pointed out in Argentina's case, these practices were initially transformed into processes of control rather than assessment. In addition to this, assessment outlooks and

mechanisms multiplied: institutional assessment, accreditation of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, assessment of research teachers - through a specific program - and assessment of the research function performed by another entity. In this sense, one wonders, how will the institutional assessment survive the emergence of *rankings* and assessment mechanisms carried out by other agencies interested in particular aspects of university functions? Is there an overload of assessment instances that provokes resistances among the evaluated institutions and lessens the number of evaluators willing to carry out this function?

Finally, from a prospective perspective, will the challenges and equilibriums of future university quality assessment be - or should they be at all - on the agenda of the university policy debate?

We propose these questions, outlined as final thoughts, as topics of debate within the spaces where university policy decision-making takes place or as hypotheses for future research. Thinking about them raises questions in order to analyze and propose improvements for the university quality assessment and accreditation system, as well as future horizons for the political management and research of these processes, in which the public university institutions themselves - within their autonomy - fulfill a fundamental role, which must be developed with active commitment.

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