

Is it pertinent to categorize universities to accredit the quality of higher education?

Carlos Efraín Montúfar Salcedo *

Pontifical Catholic University Ibarra, Ecuador.

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Abstract

The Accreditation is the public and temporary recognition of the educational institution, program or professional career that has participated in a process of evaluation of its institutional management, and, in areas of social link, research and academia. The university accreditation is part of the process of quality management that includes the evaluation and sometimes the categorization of institutions and careers. From the World Conference on Higher Education held in Paris in 2009, higher education was defined as a social public good, in which States must ensure their quality. This research analyzes initiatives established in Latin America, the United States and the European Space in the search to guarantee quality under the conceptual axis of accreditation, examining the pertinence of categorization in the Ecuadorian experience.

Keywords: Accreditation; Quality; Categorization; Education

1. Introduction

Defining the concept of accreditation from the perspective of university education is a complex process due to the multiplicity of experiences and trends currently existing in the global educational context. However, this effort is imperative in relation to the object of the present essay. Among the definitions formulated is one that identifies the university accreditation as a process whose objective is to have a quality certification exposed in the internal processes of the universities¹.

The Accreditation is therefore the public and temporary recognition of the educational institution, area, program or career that has voluntarily participated in a process of evaluation of its pedagogical, institutional and administrative management. Specialized institutional accreditation is considered by area, programs or careers; and integral institutional accreditation. In the context of the legal framework of the Republic of Peru and according to article 14 of the regulations of Law 28740, it states:

- The National System of Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification of Educational Quality, contributes through Accreditation, with the assurance of educational quality in the country.
- Accreditation is not only an instrument for continuous improvement but it is also the source of knowledge of parents and future students for a suitable selection of what to study and where to do it. With the first accreditation, whose information constitutes the baseline for the subsequent growth in quality, it will be possible to have the best observatory of how universities and study programs grow in quality.
- Accreditation seeks to ensure that the professional competencies of graduates of accredited institutions are efficient and, therefore, reflect quality educational training.

* Corresponding author: Carlos Efraín Montúfar Salcedo; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4707-0837>

From the World Conference on Higher Education held in Paris in 2009², higher education was defined as a social public good, in which States must ensure their quality. In this context, the importance of evaluative processes and the role of States in their application and development is based. According to the legal system of Peru, the objectives of the Accreditation are the following:

- The National System of Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification of Educational Quality contributes, through Accreditation, with the assurance of educational quality in the country.
- Accreditation is not only an instrument for continuous improvement but it is also the source of knowledge of parents and future students for a suitable selection of what to study and where to do it. With the first accreditation, whose information constitutes the baseline for the subsequent growth in quality, it will be possible to have the best observatory of how universities and study programs grow in quality.
- Accreditation seeks to ensure that the professional competencies of graduates of accredited institutions are efficient and, therefore, reflect quality educational training³.

In the Latin American context, the Republic of Ecuador has also implemented a process of quality in higher education. Being bordering states and of relative geographical and political homogeneity, we include their experiences in the present analysis. The legal framework, in the case of Ecuador, obeyed an old social aspiration of the country. The definitions of the educational process are inserted from the current Constitution to the most operational laws. Thus, the fifth section of the Constitution in force in Ecuador, is exposed in the Education sector Art. 26.- Education is a right of people throughout their lives and an inescapable and inexcusable duty of the State. It constitutes a priority area of public policy and state investment, guarantee of equality and social inclusion and an essential condition for good living. Individuals, families and society have the right and responsibility to participate in the educational process.

Art. 27.- Education will focus on the human being and guarantee its holistic development, within the framework of respect for human rights, the sustainable environment and democracy; it will be participatory, obligatory, intercultural, democratic, inclusive and diverse, of quality and warmth; will promote gender equity, justice, solidarity and peace; It will stimulate critical thinking, art and physical culture, individual and community initiative, and the development of skills and abilities to create and work. Education is essential for knowledge, the exercise of rights and the construction of a sovereign country, and constitutes a strategic axis for national development.

Art. 347.- The State will be responsible for: 1. Strengthening public education and coeducation; ensure the permanent improvement of quality, the expansion of coverage, physical infrastructure and the necessary equipment of public educational institutions. 2. Guarantee that educational centers are democratic spaces for the exercise of rights and peaceful coexistence. The educational centers will be spaces for early detection of special requirements. 3. Guarantee formal and non-formal forms of education. 4. Ensure that all educational entities provide education in citizenship, sexuality and environment, from a rights-based approach.

In descending correspondence with the legal structure of the country in the education sector, we will cite pertinent texts of the Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES):

- In the aforementioned law, in its chapter III of the Quality of higher education, Art. 9.- Proposes: Of the Evaluation of the quality.- The evaluation of the quality will be made periodically in accordance with the regulations issued by the Board of Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education, CEAACES. In Art. 15.- Evaluation according to the typology of higher education institutions.- All universities or polytechnic schools will be subject to the typology established by CEAACES, which will be taken into account in the evaluation processes, accreditation and categorization. By virtue of the typology of universities and polytechnic schools, CEAACES will establish the types of careers or programs that these institutions may offer, of which it will notify the CES for the approval of careers and programs. Art. 93.- Principle of quality.- The principle of quality consists in the constant and systematic search for excellence, relevance, optimal production, transmission of knowledge and development of thought through self-criticism, external criticism and permanent improvement. Art. 94.- Evaluation of quality.- The Quality Assessment is the process to determine the conditions of the institution, career or academic program, through the systematic collection of quantitative and qualitative data that allow to issue a judgment or diagnosis, analyzing its components, functions, processes, so that its results serve to reform and improve the curriculum, career or institution. The Quality Assessment is a permanent process and involves continuous monitoring.

Art. 96.- Quality assurance.- The Quality Assurance of Higher Education is constituted by the set of actions carried out by institutions linked to this sector, in order to guarantee efficient and effective management, Applicable to careers, academic programs, institutions of higher education and also to the councils or bodies of evaluators and accrediters.

Art. 97.- Academic Classification or Categorization.- The academic classification or categorization of institutions, careers and programs will be the result of the evaluation. It will refer to an ordering of institutions, careers and programs according to a methodology that includes internationally measurable and reproducible criteria and objectives.

Despite the relative similarity between the two legal structures, there is an essential difference: The Peruvian system does not include the categorization, classification or ordering of higher education institutions (HEIs). From this element, the hypothesis formulated focuses on the analysis of the relevance of the categorization of HEIs in the accreditation process, knowing that accreditation is just a strategy to certify quality in higher education. To deepen the framework of theoretical analysis, the oldest accreditation principles in the southern United States and in the European Space are submitted for consideration.

2. Criteria for the quality assurance of higher education: accreditation in the european space and in the association of universities of the southern united states (sacs)

2.1. Criteria and guidelines for quality assurance: European Higher Education Area

In the Berlin Communiqué of September 19, 2003, the ministers of the signatory states of the Bologna Process invited the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), "through its members, in cooperation with the EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB ", to develop" a consensual set of criteria, procedures and guidelines for quality assurance "and" to explore means to guarantee an adequate system of peer review of quality assurance and / or for agencies or accreditation bodies and with the aim of informing ministers of these developments in 2005 through the Bologna Follow-Up Group. " Ministers also asked ENQA to take due account of the experience of other quality assurance associations and networks. "As a result of this process, the text of Criteria and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area 2005 would be generated. The main results and recommendations of this project were the following:

- There should be European criteria for internal and external quality assurance and for external quality assurance agencies.
- European quality assurance agencies must undergo a cyclical review within five years.
- Subsidiarity will have a fundamental role, with revisions being carried out at the national level as much as possible.
- A European Registry of quality assurance agencies will be created.
- A European Registry Committee will act as responsible for the inclusion of the agencies in the registry.
- A European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education will be established.

Finally and when the recommendations are put into practice, the following results are expected:

- It will improve the coherence of quality assurance throughout the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through the use of jointly agreed criteria and guidelines.
- Higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies throughout the EHEA may use common reference elements for quality assurance.
- The Registry will facilitate the identification of professional agencies with credibility.
- Procedures for the recognition of degrees will be strengthened.
- The credibility of the work of quality assurance agencies will increase.

The importance outlined in the quality of higher education in the European Space was manifested when the General Assembly of ENQA confirmed on November 4, 2004 the name change of the former European Network in European Association for the term "quality assurance" "Used in this Report. This definition of quality includes processes such as evaluation, accreditation and auditing. This document was the product of the exchange of views and experiences among agencies and other key stakeholders (including higher education institutions, students and representatives of economic and social agents) through the work of the European Consultative Forum the Quality Guarantee in Higher Education. Being its objective, increase mutual trust between institutions and agencies, enabling the path towards mutual recognition.

Among the policies and procedures for quality assurance are the following: Approval, control and periodic review of programs and degrees, Student evaluation, Teacher quality assurance, Learning resources and support for students along with the reinforcement of Public information systems. Therefore, this accreditation system in Europe wanted to achieve its aspiration to become the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world (Lisbon Strategy), European

higher education needed to demonstrate that it takes seriously the quality of its programs and degrees and that is committed to put in place the means that ensure and demonstrate that quality.

2.2. Principles of accreditation: Association of Universities of the South of the United States (SACS).

The Association of the South of the Universities and the Commission of Universities (SACS) is the regional organism of accreditation of institutions of higher education of degree. The mission of the Southern States Commission is to improve educational quality throughout the region and improve the effectiveness of institutions to ensure that they meet the standards set by the higher education community that address the needs of the society and students.

The accreditation that SACS grants through its Commission to universities means that the institution (1) has an adequate mission to higher education, (2) it has sufficient resources, programs and services to achieve and sustain the mission and (3)) maintains clearly specified educational objectives that are coherent with its mission and appropriate to the degrees offered, and that indicate whether it is successful in achieving its objectives.

Self-regulation through accreditation incorporates the traditional philosophy of the United States, the country to which it belongs, in relation to a free people can and should govern themselves through a representative, flexible and sensitive system therefore, accreditation It is best achieved through a voluntary association of educational institutions⁴. The product of the accreditation is a public declaration of the institution's continuous ability to provide effective services and programs based on agreed requirements. The declaration of the accreditation status of the institution with the School Commission is also an affirmation of the institution's ongoing commitment at the beginning of the Commission and the philosophy of accreditation.

The University Commission supports the right of an institution to pursue its established educational mission; the right of the members of the Faculty to teach, research and publish freely; and the right of students to access opportunities for learning and the open exchange of ideas, however, the exercise of these rights must not interfere with the primary obligation of an institution to offer its students a solid education.

The Commission of colleges adheres to the following fundamental characteristics of accreditation:

- Participation in the accreditation process is voluntary and is a won and renewable state
- Institutional members develop, modify and approve accreditation requirements
- The accreditation process is representative, sensitive and appropriate for the types of accredited institutions
- Accreditation is a form of self-regulation
- Accreditation requires institutional commitment
- Accreditation is based on a peer review process
- Accreditation requires an institutional commitment to student learning and achievement.
- Accreditation recognizes the prerogative of the institution to articulate its mission, including a religious mission, within the recognized framework of higher education and its responsibility to show that it is fulfilling its mission.
- Accreditation requires institutional commitment in the concept of quality improvement through continuous evaluation and improvement.
- Accreditation expects an institution to develop a balanced governance structure designed to promote institutional integrity, autonomy and operational flexibility.
- Accreditation expects an institution to ensure that its programs are complemented with support structures and resources that allow the total growth and development of its students.

The Commission evaluates an institution and makes accreditation decisions based on the following elements: Compliance with the Integrity Principle, Compliance with basic requirements, Compliance with general standards, Additional compliance with Federal requirements and compliance with the policies of the University Commission.

3. Discussion

In the contemporary globalized world, the quality of university education is of fundamental importance. Aspects such as student mobility, the financing of requirements and the trust of educational systems take precedence in world forums. This concern of governments to try to improve the quality of higher education institutions in their countries leads them to start implementing their evaluation and accreditation systems (Rojas, 2015). However, in order to achieve the quality of education, an information system is required to account for the achievements and challenges of careers

and show that the student population exercises the full right to Higher Education, complying with the commitments assumed before the society (Vega, 2015).

In different latitudes, and continents the issue of the quality of higher education has been incorporated with preponderance. With exceptions such as the United States where its accreditation agencies date from the nineteenth century, this subject is relatively new. In Venezuela, for example, several authors conclude that we must continue working to make new definitions of the term educational quality in this context, and that the Venezuelan universities and the Venezuelan State have had mechanisms to evaluate it, however, no changes have been observed. in the transformation of the Venezuelan university (Sánchez., Pacheco., Velasco., and Encalada, 2015). In Chile it is defined that the importance of work lies mainly in the fact that in this country there is no evaluative culture regarding the work of higher education. (Ramírez., Ayarza., Char., And Silva, 2015). Malaysia, Singapore, China, and South Korea, on the other hand, show interest in establishing quality assessment systems for the extensions or headquarters of the universities (Hou, Hill, Chen, 2018).

Precisely in relation to the need to promote an evaluative culture that generates evident results, several researchers maintain that the quality of higher education can only be improved and maintained by those who are responsible and protagonists of it; that is to say, by the professors, the students and the authorities of the universities, for which the university community must believe in the system of evaluation and accreditation of quality; This should not be seen as a threat, but as something that comes from its own interest and responsibility (Alarcón, 2015).

Several opinions of highly experienced authors (Chile) on the subject argue, for example, that in the first place, the evaluation process of accreditation should clarify and specify its doctrinal-ideological bases. So far, the reform statements have been able to sustain themselves in the midst of ambiguity, offering contradictory solutions to each other, seeking to reassure conflicting expectations and resorting to promises that quickly change when audiences change. The slogan 'to move from a market education -or merchandise- to a guaranteed social right' has served to successfully articulate a rhetoric but does not account for the complexity of the 'decommodification' or 'de-mercantilization' phenomenon to which it points (Brunner, 2015).

In Ecuador, the impregnation of electoral political aspects imposed accelerated rhythms in the legal reforms of Higher Education. The Organic Law of Higher Education of 2010⁵, which established the categorization process, was renewed by the Organic Reform Law published in the Official Gazette on August 2, 2018. In said reform (Art. 97) the categorization concept is eliminated, being replaced by qualification without accreditation purposes. In article 94, preponderance is also given to self-evaluation without external coordination (CAACES). This modification has not been exposed as a topic of analysis by these institutions.

In the United States, university accreditation involves important economic aspects for its students, as in the case of the University of Meryland:

- If the university loses its accreditation, the students would no longer be eligible to receive federal financial aid. More than two-thirds of College Park students receive financial aid each year, with an average package of \$ 11,813, according to the College Board. About a third of students receive federal loans, according to the US Department of Education (Reed, and Dance, 2018).

The planning of university accreditation requires both moral and economic incentives, for all staff, taking into account that the total quality model is perceived as a system of excessive rigidity

(Habbal and Jreisat, 2018).

In the territory of the European Union was born the Erasmus program in 1987, acronym of the official name in English EuRopean Community Action Scheme for theMobility of University Students (Action Plan of the European Community for the Mobility of University Students), This innovative modality allowed the exchange of students during a semester or year in various institutions and countries of the Union, generating a European dimension of mobility of higher education, facilitating the transfer of credits, this experience then led to the Bologna process in 1999 with even more specific objectives (Solana, 2014).

The World Organization for Economic Development (OECD) argues that in the context of the growing and new form of cross-border provision of higher education, there is a need for new international initiatives to improve the delivery of quality in cross-border higher education at the international level. Global, further strengthening quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications schemes, both nationally and internationally through the development

of non-binding international guidelines on "quality provision in cross-border higher education"⁶. These guidelines, which have now been approved by the OECD and identified by UNESCO, have four main policy objectives:

In relation to the students, it proposes the protection of the risks of the lack of information, the provision of low quality and qualifications of limited validity. The qualifications must be legible and transparent in order to increase their validity and international portability. Reliable and easy-to-use sources of information should facilitate this process. Recognition procedures must be transparent, coherent, fair and reliable and impose the lowest possible burden for mobile professionals. The national quality assurance and accreditation agencies should intensify their international cooperation in order to increase mutual understanding. To maximize effectiveness in the global environment, it is essential to maintain a strong sense of identity and purpose. He also argues that one of the reasons why higher education in the United States is so successful is its particular combination of decentralization and centralization. This same organization (OECD) in the case of Chile, even recommends that universities be closed in case of obviating accreditation. Inclusive, Sánchez and Zaldívar Puig (2016) introduce the term "accredit relevance", stating that research and development requires innovation, competitiveness and development to respond to social and country needs. The welfare, wealth, power, health and even autonomy of a State depend on its investment in scientific research. Countries that invest most in R & D are the first in the global competitiveness ranking. However, they do not manifest themselves about the convenience of categorizing.

4. Conclusion

The document Criteria and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, bases its execution on the operation of external guarantee agencies, based on the Peer Review System. Likewise, it promotes the European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. This vision is particularly dissimilar with the SACS (USA) perspective. In the European system, although the review of institutional peers is presented as an option of high technical value, it is not possible to avoid the competitive aspect of the pair that can add subjective perceptions in the process, generating possible biases.

There is a structural difference between the system of Criteria and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and "The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Improvement" of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS). Although the European process has a broad consultation framework for the achievement of the legal document, it is institutional and bureaucratic in nature, which gives it a compulsory status. The European system can be interpreted as a compulsory license (as opposed to voluntary in the case of accreditation) through which a government entity regulates a profession or activity. In counterpart in the SACS system, self-regulation prevails through accreditation that incorporates the traditional philosophy of the United States, in relation to the fact that a free people can and should govern themselves through a representative, flexible and sensitive system, by therefore, accreditation would be achieved with greater performance through a voluntary association of educational institutions.

However, neither of the two systems includes categorization of universities. Evaluation and accreditation are at the service of public authorities as instruments to establish long-term higher education policies, capable of improving the economy and strengthening the social benefits of its citizens in collaboration with educational institutions. This was evident at least in the Berlin 2003 communiqué where the ministers committed themselves to support the broad development of quality accreditation at institutional, national and European level. Emphasizing the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies to accredit quality.

Consequently, the evaluation and accreditation processes do not seek to establish a level of excellence, but rather a minimum quality threshold. They are administrative processes of control, which exceed the improvement of the quality of education. They measure and evaluate university functioning at a given moment. It is therefore necessary to develop instruments and mechanisms for continuous improvement, deepening the transparency of the university system for the benefit of citizens. A pertinent experience is the participation of the students in the evaluation process, since they are subjects and actors of the institutional development (Vera-Millalén, 2018).

In Ecuador, the Organic Law of Higher Education, which established the categorization process was renewed by the Organic Reform Law of August 2, in 2018¹¹, which eliminates the categorization concept, being replaced by qualification without accreditation purposes. The importance of serene and relevant planning is recommended for all education systems. Education is a very long term investment but with high levels of discernment.

Assessing the social and scientific impact of evaluative methods of higher education is the next step in an in-volved and spiraling process. Valuing and identifying contingencies of internal and external evaluations, categorizations and

compulsory or optional accreditations on local and global societies. Without underestimating the importance given to the availability of resources and their structural harmony with the educational aims proposed in a world of globalization, which diffuses with great permeability the scientific advances but also their consults to the local social systems with a manifest confidence.

Compliance with ethical standards

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