

## Individual paper

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### **Shaping the future of the Chilean higher education: An analysis of the quality assurance instruments (0182)**

**Research domain:** Management, leadership, governance and quality

#### **A b s t r a c t**

Quality Assurance can be considered as the major issue in the last decade for the higher education systems. Largely introduced by governments in a top-down modality, the researches shows in a macro social level, that the introduction of QA instruments is related to political aims not necessarily linked to quality concerns. In this context, the aim of this paper is to analyse the changes proposed by the quality assurance policies in Chile, in two less well explored levels: the level of institutions and programs. Through the “approach by instruments” (Lescoumes and Le Galès, 2004), this paper expects to contribute in the analysis of QA in Chile, and more widely, expects to provide a theoretical discussion about the analysis of the instruments of quality assurance, in their political and technical dimension.

#### **O u t l i n e**

##### **Introduction**

Since 1990's quality notion becomes central in officials discourse about Higher Education. Three decades later, the implementation of national policies related to quality, together with the creation of local and supra-national agencies, are common experiences in a worldwide level. These developments involved a large number of actors, who have constructed different, and even often antagonist discourses.

Largely promoted by international organisations and governments, promotional Quality Assurance discourses relate it quality with a variety of aims, like internationalisation, comparability, stakeholder's participation, knowledge society, and so on. Contrary, highly questioned in its origins, orientations and effects, QA systems are analysed in a very critical way by researchers and academics (Vinokour, 2004; Newton, 2007). We can affirm that QA is became a controversial subject.

##### **Questioning quality assurance policies and their instruments**

Admittedly, on the one hand HE systems have been faced several changes which had meant significant challenges for quality, therefore quality concerns can being thought as the logical continuity. On the other hand, the introduction of QA instruments responds also to other international trends, like: financial constraints of cost-cutting strategies and the increasing pressure for accountability (Hopbach and Serrano-Velarde, 2007). The authors point out clearly, as Harvey and Newton (2004; 2007), that the introduction of QA at least in Europe, is related also to other issues less connected to quality concerns.

The questions that arise are what changes are promoted by QA for HE systems? What are the changes proposed at the level of institutions and at level of degree programs? And, how HE programs, are transformed by QA?

In a research level, analysed issues highlights the conceptual problems about quality; the analysis of national QA schemes, and there outcomes and effects (Pratasavitskaya and

Stensaker, 2010). These issues are frequently focused in different dimensions of the QA: 1) Political, to analyse changes in regulation and change in ideational orientations of the state (Perellon 2007), 2) Organisational, which stress the problem of management and change within HE institutions (Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker, 2010) and, 3) Methodological, focuses in the mechanisms adopted by agencies at national level (Lemaitre, 2008).

The research development provides more realism in the field, linking quality ideas with the quality assurance effects, and the introduction of quality to strategic priorities (Stensaker, 2008). Nevertheless, the introduction of the changes no directly linked to quality, is analysed at the level of the political dimension which stresses the questions about regulation and financing. Instead at an organisational level, the analysis focuses more in the effects, or in the academics opinion about effects. In this context, this paper argues that there is still a lack in the analysis of the changes proposed by QA instruments at level of institutions and programmes.

If quality assurance instruments for institutions and programs are not directly connected with quality, can we be surprised that the effects of their implementation are not related to quality improvement?

### **The analysis of quality instruments for institutions and programs**

In the last SRHE conference we discussed the global changes proposed by the external QA system in Chile, considered like a policy domain (Perellon, 2007). The research analysed the ideational orientations of the QA in a market-oriented higher education system. This year we propose to continue these discussions and deepening the analysis in the instruments proposed by the QA policy. Therefore, the aim of this paper is highlight the changes promoted by the external QA instruments in Chile, at institutional and degree programs levels.

In this context, an interesting way to trace and to understand the changes proposed within a political arena is to develop an “approach by instruments” (Lescoumes and Le Gales, 2004).

This framework understand one political instrument as a *social and technical dispositive which organise social relations between public power and the recipients based on the representations and meanings that it conveys*. The analyse of instruments proposed by a policy, is an approach which facilitate the deconstruction of the objectives stated by the policies, considering that the choice of instruments is not neutral thus is not only a technical option, is also a political option. This framework considers that the *changes can be made by instruments, by techniques, without agreement about the aims or the principle of reforms*. Is because, *the kinds of instruments chosen, their proprieties and the justifications to choose them, are [to us] frequently more revealing than the statements of reasons and later discursive rationalisations* (p.28).

This research understand that *public policies are not used (at least not only) to solve problems*, they represent frameworks to interpret the world and aiming at the future toward which projected a society, or at least, some of its actors (Muller, 2000, p.194-196).

### **The quality assurance instruments in Chile**

The main instruments proposed in the QA policy, will be analysed through formal documents produced by policy makers. The instruments are 1) the accreditation for institutions and programmes, 2) the competitive funding to the academic innovation and, 3) the performance contracts for public higher education institutions. The study contemplates to analyse the orientations, the contents and the evaluation proposed for every instrument, to highlight the changes that are supported for the government at institutional and program levels.

Following the instruments typology, proposed by Lascoumes et Le Gales (2004), the preliminary analysis reveals that the instruments established belongs to two types of instruments: conventional/incentive and, norms/standards. These instruments are justified by policy makers like been a less interventionist forms of regulation (Lescoumes and Le Gales, 2004). Nevertheless, like is the case in Chile, when the provision of funding depend of the instruments implementation, it can become binding.

Contrary to the experiences of other countries, the quality assurance instruments are introduced in Chile with a significant increase in financing for higher education institutions. This is the case particularly, with the competitive funding to academic innovation. Trough this instrument, and whit the “performance contract”, one of the priorities is to change the financial structure to institutions. In accreditations, the priorities for the Chilean government are to reinforce the organisational dimension and the management of universities, and also the transformation of programs in programs constructed by competences.

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