

Constructions of Higher Education Quality Assurance in Chile: “learning to play the game” (0189)

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Abstract

This critical case study research draws on preliminary analysis of interview data produced as part of a doctoral research project analysing Higher Education (HE) Quality Assurance (QA) in the Latin American country of Chile. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in April and May 2016 with a range of stakeholders in the Chilean system including representatives of QA agencies, QA experts, university administrators and academics. QA is approached here as a topic of study rather than a resource to ‘improve education’. QA takes different forms and these forms have varying relationships with HE systems and institutions, there are also different ways of framing and understanding QA. The paper will elaborate the current model of QA in Chile before exploring conceptions of quality, justifications, uses, and consequences of QA, as well as perceived issues with the current system.

Paper

The field of Quality Assurance in Higher Education has grown hugely over the last 30 years as ideology that promotes accountability and evaluation as a means of achieving efficiency and effectiveness (Filippakou, 2011). To perceive it as merely a neutral technicality would be misleading. This is particularly pertinent in Latin America, with the dominant model of ‘quality’ originating primarily from the Global North, acting as a mechanism of asymmetric power and control (Blanco-Ramirez, 2014). Chile provides an interesting case study because it has a highly privatised and stratified educational system (including at HE level) and was one of the first and most powerful neoliberal experiments in the world (Cabalin, 2012).

The QA system in Chile primarily consists of accreditation mechanisms at programme and institutional levels administered by the National Accreditation Commission (CNA) and the private agencies they authorise. It is based on a ‘self-regulation’ concept of quality whereby the goal is fulfilling one’s stated mission and demonstrating internal consistency. Although accreditation is intended to provide a degree of regulation to both the public and private sector the process is voluntary and incurs a fee (the only disciplines with compulsory accreditation are teaching and medicine) (Espinoza & Gonzalez, 2013). This approach neatly matches neoliberal ideals of freedom and individualisation. QA in Chile is a form of public control over HE and at the same time a public legitimisation of the existence of private provision of HE through claims of accountability and transparency. Accreditation acts as a marketing kitemark and also a form of ‘absolution’ or ‘confessional’ (Hill & Chung, 1995).

Achieving quality?

In line with much of the literature on this subject (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011) almost all interviewees acknowledged that quality has multiple conceptualisations and is difficult to define. Accreditation is seen as some indication of quality but the truth of this is dubious

especially given that the requirements are perceived to be minimal and very few institutions are not accredited. There was also concern that QA can only really assess (or induce the need for) organisational and managerial processes rather than evaluating teaching, learning and research.

The duration of accreditation is seen by many as a relative measure of quality, a 'quasi-ranking'. However, CNA denies the intention is to rank, it is rather an indication of the strength of and confidence in procedures to fulfil the institutional mission - a good university may receive fewer years of accreditation when the ownership or management changes because the institutional mission and procedures are likely to be in a state of flux. This can be interpreted within the framework of QA as risk management whereby the greater the uncertainty regarding a university the higher the need for close regulation (King, 2016).

Justifications

For universities, the close link between accreditation and public funding makes financial gain the strongest justification for QA. In this context QA becomes a game played to receive the funding that many universities rely on. The incentive is to make sure you receive accreditation at any cost, not to use the accreditation as an open and honest process of improvement or accountability. Within this, the incentives for institutional accreditation are stronger than for programme accreditation because this has been the prerequisite for participation in the student loan programme and now for the new 'free education' policy. It is therefore more efficient for a university to focus resources on obtaining institutional accreditation than to get accreditation for every programme that they offer.

Protection of students, potential students, and their families is often presented as the intended justification of QA but for many interviewees this was quickly followed by the idea that this is ineffective in practice. Providing transparent and rigorous information theoretically enables students to make informed choices regarding where and what to study but many interviewees believe that this mechanism is only successful for some groups of students and not for others. Those students from higher socio-economic segments of society are more likely to use this information, it takes social capital or assistance of friends and family with prior experience in order to navigate this complex system for personal benefit. For many potential first generation students and their families the idea of the university and the discourse of social mobility is so powerful that few questions are asked about differences between universities or what actually goes on inside the 'black box' of the university.

Perceived issues

The fact that accreditation is voluntary and that it carries such high financial incentives is seen as a major delegitimisation of the system in regards to effectively assuring quality. Alongside a corruption scandal in 2012 (Fleet et al, 2014) there is a distinct lack of public trust in the QA system. This also reflects wider assumptions regarding trust in public regulation in a context where power is highly concentrated and there is a high degree of overlap between membership of different agencies that should theoretically be monitoring each other. Incentives for 'playing the system' are high and there are multiple means of administering ungainful benefits.

Another perceived problem for many is that the QA system does not protect the more vulnerable students in HE. These students are more likely to go to universities with fewer years of accreditation or no accreditation at all, to need to use the flawed student loan system, to take longer to complete their degrees, to incur high levels of debt, and finally to be unable to find 'graduate level employment' on completion.

Final thoughts

QA activities have affected HE in Chile although arguably not in their intended manner. They have introduced new vocabularies and organising principles regarding governance of HE that are widely understood within the sector and whose presence is accepted even if not valued as worthwhile in terms of ensuring or improving 'quality'. Albeit unintended, interviewees were clear that the consequences were neither unpredictable nor unexpected. This paper demonstrates the importance of looking beyond QA as a technical activity to explore the wider political contexts and conditions into which it is absorbed.

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