

Self-evaluation process and university quality in Ecuador*

Proceso de autoevaluación y calidad universitaria en Ecuador

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Abstract

The quality of Higher Education in the Ecuador has been a topic widely addressed in the last 10 years, generating transcendental changes from the modification of the structures of the system to the reconsideration of its planning and processes. The purpose of this research is to study the process of self-evaluation and quality in institutions of higher education of the Ecuador. For this, a qualitative research was carried out where models, management indicators and general aspects based on current laws were conceptualized. It is concluded that it is imperative to promote the self-evaluation of universities, not only for accreditation purposes but as a complex and continuous social process in their ontological, gnoseological and axiological references, contributing to the progress and reconstruction of the substantial processes of the institution, in order to improve its management mechanisms and respond satisfactorily to the expectations of the entire university community; under own institutional guidelines and follow-ups and of the quality assurance system in education superior.

Key words: Management quality, self-assessment processes, quality assurance, continuous improvement.

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Resumen

La calidad de la educación superior en el Ecuador ha sido un tema abordado ampliamente en los últimos 10 años, generándose cambios trascendentales desde la modificación de las estructuras del sistema hasta la reconsideración de su planificación y procesos. El propósito de esta investigación es estudiar el proceso de autoevaluación y calidad en las instituciones de educación superior del Ecuador. Para ello se llevó a cabo una investigación cualitativa donde se conceptualizaron modelos, indicadores de gestión y aspectos generales fundamentados en las leyes vigentes. Se concluye que resulta imperioso impulsar la autoevaluación de las universidades no solo con fines de acreditación sino como un proceso social complejo y continuo en sus referentes ontológico, gnoseológico y axiológico, aportando al progreso y reconstrucción de los procesos sustanciales de la institución con la finalidad de mejorar sus mecanismos de gestión y responder satisfactoriamente a las expectativas de toda la comunidad universitaria; bajo lineamientos y seguimientos propios y del sistema de aseguramiento de la calidad en educación superior.

Palabras clave: calidad de la gestión, procesos de autoevaluación, aseguramiento de la calidad, mejora continua.

Introduction

Currently, the management of educational quality is not only analyzed at the academic process level, but also based on established standards for each of the processes immersed in university higher education. The Ecuadorian higher education system is managed under the principles of responsible autonomy, co-government, equal opportunities, quality, relevance, among other aspects that fully govern the institutions, their actors, their processes and resources, with the intention of maintaining quality standards in order to ensure the increasing levels of academic excellence and relevance, based on the co-responsibility of its members. In this regard, Apunte (2007) explains that experiences in university quality are limited and the evaluation process constitutes a way to achieve national and international accreditation, since it values academic quality considering the reality and needs of each institution, as well as the framework of legal reference, and the governmental criteria by means of which the quality of the same is appreciated and qualified.

In this sense, the institutions of higher education of the Ecuador, attached to legal regulations, have made revisions on academic evaluation in the international and scientific field, finding theoretical depth on quality models around higher education, obtaining a diversity of models,

which at the same time generate a strong heterogeneity regarding evaluation criteria, tools and strategies. Given this, Ecuadorian universities find a great multiplicity of ways to evaluate teaching, where research appears as an essential and basic aspect, while the link with the productive and social sectors has been taking more place, framed in the Organic Law of Higher Education of 2010, and the organic reform law to the Organic Law of Higher education of 2018, where quality is a principle of higher education to guarantee it.

On this topic Koppel (2015) explains that empirically “the evaluation processes carried out have denoted the low academic quality offered [...], since there is no capacity and certain competence today to carry out the evaluation and accreditation processes of diaphanous form, with academic transparency” (p. 38). For Espinoza (2016) this affects the labor market, which knows the university reality, as well as the differences in the quality of the universities and their professionals. Therefore, it is common to see in the media the demand for professionals graduated from certain universities; with this they differentiate the quality of professionals and remuneration that is also varied based on this criterion.

These and other findings put the Quality Accreditation and Assurance Assessment Council (CEAACES for its acronym in Spanish) and the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (CACES for its acronym in Spanish) on alert, detecting the need to link the self-evaluation, peer evaluation and accreditation processes to improve quality and not view it only as a bureaucratic process. Thus, the purpose of this research is to generate a theoretical approximation of the aspects that underlie the self-evaluation and evaluation activities of university processes and quality management in higher education institutions in Ecuador. For the development, the field of action was delimited to planning zones 1 and 4 of Ecuador, however, within the theoretical approach, general aspects were taken that influence each of the processes according to the CACES Evaluation Model 2019.

Materials and Methods

The research is based on the analytical-synthetic method, in order to study and address the facts that are linked to the object of study, a decomposition occurs individually and later in general (Bernal, 2010). Although this method is validated in scientific knowledge, through the theoretical interpretation in this case of the self-evaluation processes and the management of university quality, the facts of reality are also analyzed.

This research was carried out taking into consideration the university system in Ecuador, taking into consideration the formally approved legal guidelines. A general determination of the theoretical and methodological basis of the topic is produced, to formulate the episteme and the guidelines that were obtained from them, which have allowed the establishment of

the processes of self-evaluation and of the management of university quality, components of the educational conception, as well as the ordering of each of them, the links and structuring.

Likewise, an administrative and epistemic analysis is carried out, also supported by the methods of hermeneutics and phenomenology, the latter according to Paramá, Aragón and Coca (2017), consists of the idea that the intervening actors make use of the process of perception of the research object and the same brings reality, in this order of ideas there is an assessment of the claims and responses raised by each subject or by obtaining documentary information, which is aimed at accounting for concurrent or divergent elements on the dynamics of the processes of self-evaluation and management of university quality.

The addressing that this research has is under the qualitative methodological theoretical approach, with the purpose of looking for the theoretical arguments that help the rigorous understanding of the administrative phenomenon and explain under arguments the perception and interpretation of reality, its dynamics and transformations. They are methodological theoretical strategies that problematize the process of self-evaluation and the management of university quality, contributing to the search and consideration of new analysis criteria.

Results

Institutional evaluation and self-evaluation: Theoretical Foundations

This section begins by considering some authors' definitions that model evaluation, self-evaluation and their processes, as well as the control and quality of organizational management. Castillo (2005) describes evaluation as the process by which one seeks to obtain a value judgment or an appreciation of the behavior or characteristics of an object, an activity, a process, or its results. This identification process allows highlighting qualities, weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages of what is evaluated, providing reliable information for decision-making.

In the same way, it is stated that "Self-evaluation is a substantial and integrative process, which allows an institution to determine weaknesses and strengths in order to implement actions for its continuous improvement" (CEAACES, 2015, p. 3). Consequently, it can be added that:

Self-evaluation understood as a systematic reflection process makes it possible to understand and explain the different situations of university education and, based on this knowledge, make informed value judgments and adopt decisions aimed at correcting errors and strengthening positive aspects of planning and execution of institutional work. (CEAACES, 2015, p. 12)

The institutional evaluation and self-evaluation processes, both internal and external, contribute to the formation of a quality organizational culture, due to its constant rethinking of goals and formulation of new growth and development activities. In turn, internal self-evaluation encourages and promotes the formation of multidisciplinary teams that propose and raise improvements based on the analyzes carried out and results obtained during the different stages of the process and data collection, in addition to this, it is generated and promoted among teams a culture in this regard, towards the value of the work of others, as well as that of the members of the same team, because quality is socialized and developed, as an essential component of institutional success, which increases its own learning during each process.

In this order of ideas, it is important to mention that in Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES for its acronym in Spanish) of 2018, new terms and elements related to quality have been considered, such as: Participation policies, analysis of institutional reality, work articulated between the Higher Education Council (CES for its acronym in Spanish), the CACES, and Higher Education Institutions (HEI for its acronym in Spanish), in addition other monitoring and internal quality assurance methodologies have been increased, based on standards with their respective fundamental elements, which can be reformulated during continuous self-evaluation processes, since both qualitative and quantitative standards and elaboration of improvement plans are handled.

When mentioning self-evaluation processes, it should be noted that these are embedded within control management mechanisms in organizations, as defined by Kralj (1988), management control is considered higher order, due to its wide scope within the activities of the organization, which involves evaluating management at all levels and functions, in order to point out the positive and negative aspects that affect the organization and the management itself, in the search for acceptable efficacy and efficiency in the short, medium and long term.

However, Pérez-Carballo (2013) make sure that management control is the mechanism by which Management guarantees that the resources the company has are obtained and used effectively and efficiently to achieve the objectives of the organization, in addition that its purpose is to direct the organization to develop the selected strategies in order to achieve the established objectives.

Within the management processes, quality analysis is considered a fundamental category to carry out the evaluation of higher education institutions in the world; however, the definition of quality itself presents complexity in its conceptualization due to the number of epistemological, practical and methodological interpretations assumed for this term.

This proposed model contains quality assurance as the heart of university processes, based on an approach aimed at achieving results with or without accreditation purposes, and this leads us to think a little about the implementation of a new organizational culture that is

managed from all hierarchical levels and based on the 4 concepts established in the figure 1, for the achievement of quality assurance.



Figure 1. Quality assurance diagram. Source: author's own elaboration.

These proposed elements are: Accreditation, Academic Qualification, Evaluation without accreditation purposes and Evaluation for accreditation purposes. In this way, the current institutional self-evaluation structure is made up of various models of classification, qualification, and analysis of the data produced, including the multi-criteria method with utility functions, the fuzzy logic model, and the cluster analysis method, all with the intention of making the methods used more reliable and verifiable.

Among some of the considerations, it is pointed out that:

In the case of a multi-criteria approach, the analyst seeks to build multiple criteria based on various points of view. These points of view represent different axes along which various actors in the decision process justify, transform and argue their preferences" (CEAACES, 2013, p. 25)

Contextualization of the quality of Higher Education in Ecuador

At the university level, aspects such as academic quality, the equitable distribution in the allocation of resources according to the established levels and quality standards, as well as the vertiginous changes in the labor markets that lead to honest professional competencies and skills, justify that the Inter-institutional System of Quality Assurance of Higher Education in the country

implements mechanisms to encourage universities to evaluate teaching, research, community ties and institutional conditions, in the interest of better service and correct important aspects at their levels of study, guaranteeing students a cognitive development and competencies in accordance with the local, national and international socioeconomic reality, to comply with the principle of constitutional and regulatory quality of higher education in Ecuador.

In this context, and despite the fact that a process of quality assurance of higher education institutions has been developing, Naranjo (2016) points out that in Ecuador “a culture of evaluation has not been generated” (p. 102) in this area and its relevance and excellence in teaching, social mission, pedagogical modalities, academic levels, disciplinary fields, local and regional vocation and others have not been considered. For Cruz (2009), an evaluation that seeks to ignore these dimensions would necessarily be reduced to a disciplinary and vigilance exercise, which is not enough to conceive of university quality in the country, since it requires the incorporation of social dimensions, commitment to communities, relevance and social responsibility, among others.

In addition, explains Naranjo (2016) that university evaluation activities do not respond to the specific purposes of the process, in addition, universities conceived as spaces of knowledge, based on science, knowledge and academic excellence, in their great majority, they are not responsible for responding with total coherence to the requirements of the students and the economic and social needs of the country.

Considering the aforementioned aspects and legal requirements, it is imperative to promote the self-evaluation of the universities as a complex social process in their ontological, epistemological and axiological references, leading to progress and, if possible, to the reconstruction of the processes of the institutions of higher education, trying to improve its levels and respond to the expectations of users, according to the quality assurance system in higher education in Ecuador as stipulated by law.

This indicates that, although it is true that significant efforts have been made on university evaluation, it is also true that it cannot respond to a single or global quality model and cannot arise from theories and abstractions, as it is the result of actions that respond to specific social needs, which exist in a specific period. In this regard, Cruz (2009) explains that quality is valued according to the moment and the time, therefore, all the processes, indicators and criteria must be designed for the context and the determined moment.

In Ecuador, in the LOES of 2018, in its chapter 2, article 3, it is established: “self-evaluation is a process of critical, reflective and participative analysis in order to identify its strengths and weaknesses, with the object to undertake continuous improvement actions.” For this reason, self-evaluation processes play a fundamental role in establishing the guidelines to follow, since they show the way to go, in relation to compliance with quality standards, where not only aspects are identified, but reflectively, participatory and objectively analyzes

each standard with its respective fundamental or substandard element, by a prepared and trained commission responsible for the execution, internal and external coordination, and monitoring of the plans.

Currently, there is a Model for the Evaluation of Universities and Polytechnic Schools of 2019, which is the result of the discussion of the proposal worked by the Permanent Commission of Institutional Evaluation of the CACES. This evaluation model is distributed as indicated in table 1.

Table 1. University Assessment Model 2019

| Axis | Dimension | Number | Standards | Elem. Fund. | Sources | Responsible(s) |
|--------------------------------|-----------|--------|--|-------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Teaching (7 standards) | Planning | 1 | Planning of teaching processes | 5 | 8* | Academic Planning |
| | | 2 | Execution of teacher processes | 5 | 11* | Academic coordination |
| | Execution | 3A | Ownership of teachers | Ec. | 4 (SIIES) | Data team |
| | | 4A | Teacher training | Ec. | 6 (SIIES) | Data team |
| | Planning | 5 | Planning of student processes | 5 | 8* | Academic Planning |
| | Execution | 6 | Execution of student processes | 5 | 8* | Academic coordination |
| | | 7 | Qualification of undergraduate and graduate students | Ec. | 6 (SIIES) | Data team |
| Investigation (4 standards) | Planning | 8 | Research planning | 5 | 10* | Research Director |
| | Execution | 9 | Investigation execution | 5 | 10* | |
| | Results | 10 | Academic and scientific production | 5 | 5* | |
| | | 11 | Production articles in indexed journals | Ec. | 4 (SIIES) | |

| Axis | Dimension | Number | Standards | Elem. Fund. | Sources | Responsible(s) |
|------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------------------------|-------------|------------|---------------------------------------|
| Link with society (3 standards) | Planning | 12 | Linking Planning | 5 | 10* | Bonding Director |
| | Execution | 13 | Execution Linking | 5 | 10* | |
| | Results | 14 | Linking programs and projects | 5 | 4* | |
| Institutional Conditions | | 15 | Strategic and Operational Planning | 5 | 9* | Institutional Planning Director |
| | | 16 | Infrastructure and Equipment | 5 | 5* | Buildings |
| | | 17 | Libraries | 5 | 4** | Libraries Director |
| | | 18 | Internal Quality Management | 5 | 6** | General Management Coordinator |
| | | 19 | Student and University Welfare | 5 | 9** | University Welfare Coordinator |
| | | 20 | Equal opportunities | 5 | 10* | University Welfare Coordinator |
| | | 20 | 20 | 80 | 147 | |

Source: author's own elaboration.

All based on a rating scale for both core elements and standards, ranging from compliance, approximation to compliance, partial compliance, insufficient compliance or non-compliance.

Discussion

The processes of self-evaluation and management of university quality in Ecuador are constantly changing, however these improvements are based on a solid self-critical analysis carried out by the Institutional Evaluation Commission of CACES, in relation to the previous evaluation models and their implementation, also considers aspects of the approach that is contemplated in the Institutional Evaluation Policy, which is based on the LOES of 2018, which expresses ideas and opinions updated and approved by all those who converge in

the decision-making of the regional System of Standardized indicators of Coexistence and Citizen Security (SES for its acronym in Spanish).

The self-evaluation process is governed by three phases or moments: Planning the self-assessment process; execution; and report generation and delivery of results.

In this sense, the self-evaluation and quality management should be oriented to follow the line of the changes made to the regulations, where its purpose is to promote participatory spaces for critical and purposeful analysis within the institutions, as well as to know the realities based on academic-administrative conditions existing in the HEI to develop actions that strengthen quality assurance. All these processes must contribute to the generation of a culture of continuous evaluation and improvement, which is why one of the challenges faced by self-evaluation processes is the in-depth analysis of information, that is, not only focusing on the existence of this but also in analyzing the content.

Analyzing each of the aspects indicated, it can be confirmed that the purpose of the established models to guide the guidelines to be followed in self-evaluation issues, is to carry out the evaluations for accreditation purposes to the universities and polytechnic schools (not categorize them). "Understanding that the ultimate goal is quality and not accreditation" (LOES of 2018, Art. 95) the main objective (or purpose) is to assess how HEI are complying, in a balanced way (or not), with the development of the three substantive functions of the Ecuadorian university: teaching, research and innovation and connection with society, which is the basis of the concept of quality established in article 93 of the LOES of 2018 is defined as:

The quality principle establishes the continuous, self-reflective search for the improvement, assurance and collective construction of the culture of higher educational quality, with the participation of all levels of higher education institutions and the Higher Education System, based on the balance of teaching, research and innovation and link with society, oriented by relevance, inclusion, democratization of access and equity, diversity, responsible autonomy, comprehensiveness, democracy, the production of knowledge, the dialogue of knowledge, and citizen values.

In the 2019 evaluation model, some aspects were included as mentioned in figure 2.

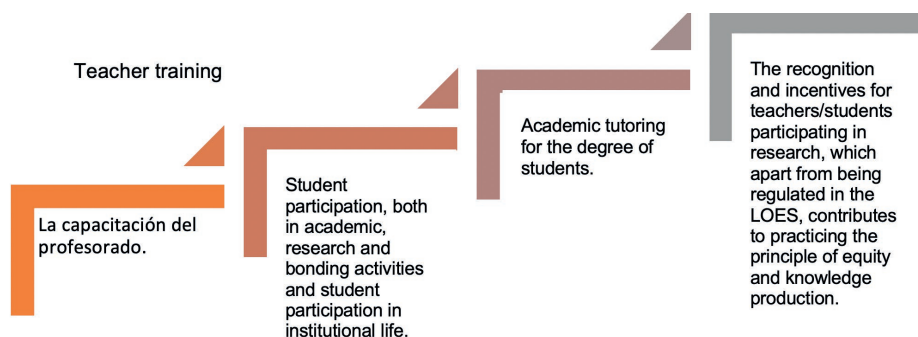


Figure 2. Aspects considered in the 2019 evaluation model. Source: author's own elaboration.

An aspect of relevance is the description and use of two types of indicators in the models presented: the qualitative and quantitative. In this sense, the institutional self-evaluation processes specify that the qualitative ones correspond to an affirmative proposition that establishes a set of qualities that the HEI and programs must fulfill to ensure a minimum of established quality, while the quantitative standard presents and describes calculation formulas and established variables.

This presents a reflection, in the sense that, for qualitative indicators, there must be well-detailed instruments to avoid the subjectivity of the evaluators, and thus be able to clearly consider each of the deficiencies in the analyzed processes. Through research, the existence of institutional self-assessment models that only handle qualitative indicators has been evidenced and this allows us to infer the concept of a stable culture of continuous and objective self-assessment, while the model currently implemented in Ecuador still manages mixed standards, that is to say qualitative and quantitative for their evaluations, since the development of their quality culture is in consolidation, however it is evident that since the first evaluation processes to date the quantity of quantitative standards has decreased substantially. These considerations force HEI to manage quality standards oriented to systemic processes (input-transformation-output) and not only to the fulfillment of parameters under punctuated numerical scales.

Conclusions

The self-evaluation processes have made relative progress, but there is no evaluative practice that has been internalized in institutional processes, which indicates that universities are not prepared to overcome the process, since most of them had to start it with the adaptation of their structure to the basic functions, namely: teaching, research, linkage and institutional conditions, taking into account that said distribution does not always satisfy the requirements and equal conditions of all universities. Hence the importance of advancing research that contributes and contributes

to consolidation through the implementation of the new 2019 evaluation model, where, among other aspects, deadlines are established for the achievement of goals, which go hand in hand with standards of quality and its respective fundamental elements and sources of information, in addition to a modular structure that involves planning, execution and results. In addition, the incorporation of process improvement tools or also called quality tools is recommended to start the path towards a culture of continuous process improvement, which will help the formulation and application of the improvement plan as a final input within self-assessment processes.

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