Quality assurance: does it make a difference?
Report of an international study

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Project: Quality Assurance: public policy and university management

General objective:

To contribute to the improvement of quality management of higher education, both at the national system level and that of higher education institutions, and to enhance knowledge and trust in the quality of higher education between Latinamerican and European participants.

Coordinator: CINDA, a network of universities en Latin America and Europe

Lines of action

Line 1:

Assessment of the impact of quality assurance processes on the operation of HEIs

Line 2:

Design, development and piloting of a set of learning modules for quality assurance

Participants

- Universities that are members of CINDA, from Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador, Spain, Italy, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, Domnican Republic, Uruguay, Venezuela

- Associates:

  - Red Iberoamericana para la Acreditación de la Calidad de la Educación Superior, RIACES

  - International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, INQAAHE

  - Centre International d'Etudes Pedagogiques, CIEP

Actions

General framework:

- Development of a frame of reference for the project (concepts, basic definitions)
- National reports, on the state of higher education in general and on quality assurance schemes in place

Specific actions for line 1:

- Ananalysis of international experience
- Identification of areas and dimensions to assess impact
- Methodological aspect
- Pilot project

Frame of reference

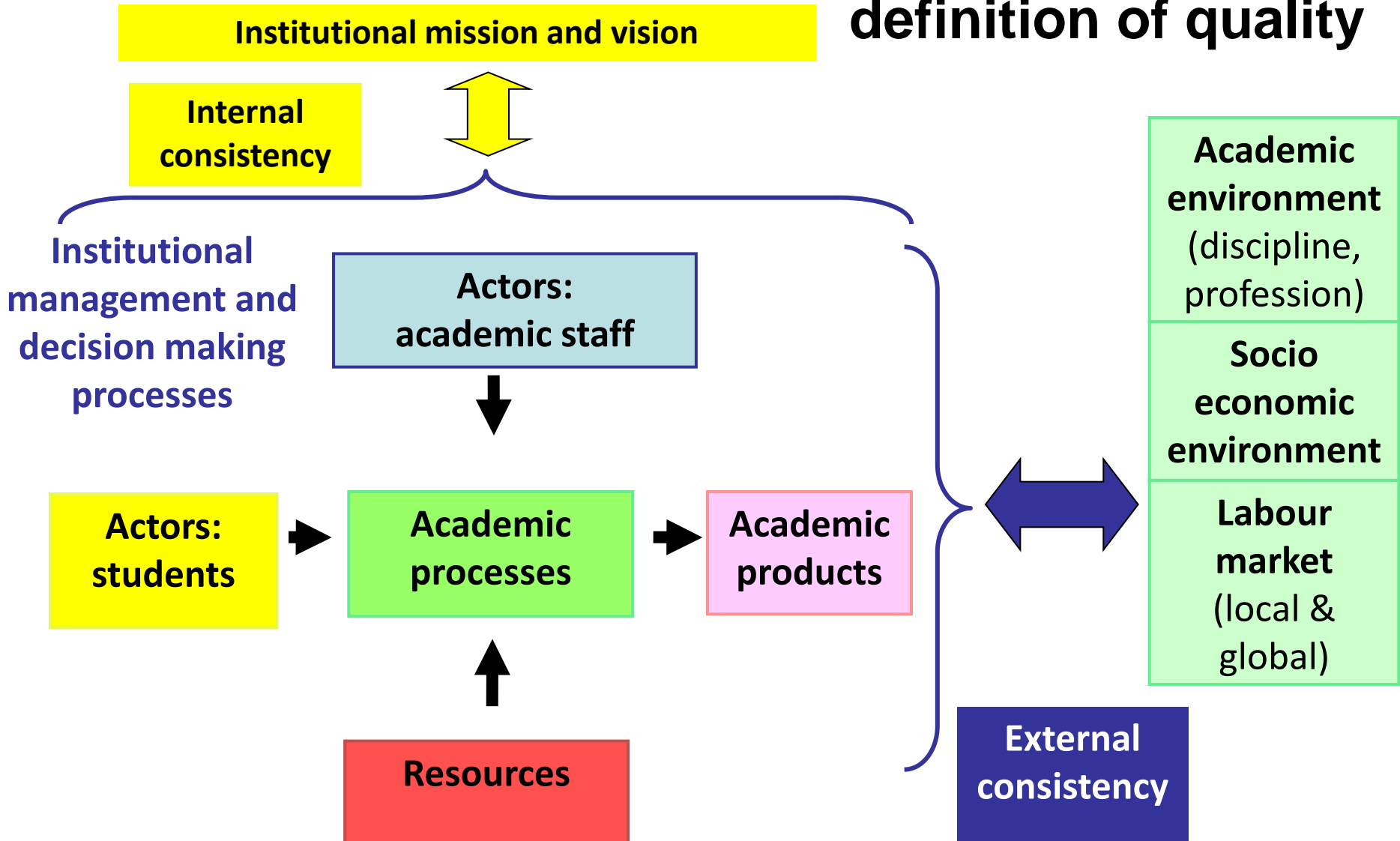- Analysis of different definitions for quality, and consensus on an operational approach:

> **Institutional principles and priorities (mission) → internal consistency**
> **Response to selected academic and social demands → external consistency**
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> **INSTITUTIONAL PURPOSES**

- Components of quality

- Different purposes of QA processes

- Glossary

An operational definition of quality

Institutional mission and vision

Internal consistency

Institutional management and decision making processes

Actors: academic staff

Actors: students → **Academic processes** → **Academic products**

Resources

Academic environment (discipline, profession)

Socio economic environment

Labour market (local & global)

External consistency

(Adapted from J.R.Toro)

Methodology

- Impossible to isolate the effect of QA: case studies with a common framework

- Study focused on seven countries: Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Portugal, Spain

- Four universities in each country, plus six in Mexico

- Interviews, focus groups and questionnaires

Respondents

At the national level:

- Head of the agency dealing with higher education

- Head of the national QA agency

- Professional associations

At the institutional level:

- University leaders (Vicerrectors, Directors of planning, Deans, Heads of Department)

- Quality assurance coordinator

- Academic faculty

- Students

- Graduates

Areas and dimension

Three areas:

- General aspects of higher education / management of the HE system

- Institutional management

- Teaching

The following is based on Latin American reports. European reports have not yet been submitted.

Main findings
1. Higher education systems

- General recognition of the need for QA, and of its benefits. Some criticism about the way in which it is carried out, especially with regard to the need to take diversity into account: not all HEIs can be evaluated with the same criteria

- Development of a common language, shared conceptual framework

- QA linked to achieving stated purposes, which have become more specific as a result

- Academic processes are systematized, formalized and made more transparent

- Actions to improve system wide information mechanisms, with little recognition of their improvement, especially regarding timely access to information for the public.

- QA is being used as a short cut for the recognition of qualifications, mainly in bilateral agreements

- Governments use QA as a means to recognize certain institutions and programs, and provide incentives to them

- No mechanisms for participation of HEIs in the design of QA standards and procedures

Main findings
2. Institutional management

- Development of institutional mechanisms to support QA, but follow up of QA processes is limited to cyclical evaluation

- Strong improvement of institutional information systems in terms of coverage, access and reliability. Work in progress to link academic and administrative information systems, not yet achieved

- Strong links established between QA processes and institutional planning: clearer definitions of goals and indicators

- Improved financial management at the unit level (Faculties, Departments): better allocation of resources, improved effectiveness, efficiency and follow up of their use

- Centralization of decision making, which carries a risk of burocratization and rigidity

Management of academic staff:

- New modes of evaluating academic staff, although higher degrees are more important than teaching effectiveness or pedagogic proficiency

- Student evaluation in place, but with strong criticisms

Management of teaching

- Higher valuation of teaching

- Improved allocation of funds for teaching resources, based on evaluation results

- Institutional support for curricular innovation, improved definition of learning outcomes and study plans

- Flexibilization of regulations to improve student mobility

- Increased links with external stakeholders

Main findings
3. Teaching and learning

- Strong emphasis on curricular improvements, revision of study plans,improved definition of expected learning outcomes

- Closer attention is paid to student progress rates, retention and graduation rates, and most HEIs have introduced new and updated student support mechanisms

- Institutional support is provided to improve teaching practices and assessment of learning. Students and academic staff report some improvement, but also point to the difficulty in making significant changes

- Students and recent graduates report improvement in the preparation for the labor market, and on the consideration of the views of external stakeholders in curriculum design and development.

- Professional associations, on the other hand, said they had no input in QA or information about it

FINAL COMMENTS

The opinions gathered must be now confronted with the characteristics of the QA systems . But preliminary analysis shows that impact is more likely when:

- QA mechanisms recognize and validate institutional autonomy
- There is a provision for resources and incentives for the implementation of improvement plans
- There are links to other policy instruments
- Institutional leaders provide explicit support
- QA becomes embedded as a component of quality management

- It is interesting to note that, with few exceptions, leaders have a less positive view of significant improvements than academic staff, and students tend to have a positive evaluation of positive changes

- There was no significant input from external stakeholders. Further work is needed in this respect.

- There is strong criticism to the operation of private QA agencies in the two countries where these operate

- There is a risk of burocratization, and of an overload of administrative work

In the final analysis, it is encouraging to see that most respondents found that QA had had a significant impact on the quality of their institutions and programs

Thank you

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