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Nuevos actores en un viejo escenario : la profesionalización de la gestión de la calidad académica en Chile, 1990-2015

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Summary

The growing number of academic programmes and the amount of higher education institutions that offer them is a phenomenon present in different parts of the world today. It is reflected by an increase in coverage, the diversity of the educational offer and the student population's heterogeneity. However, this does not always bring with it the same improvement in quality, which has led to the creation of external control methods and demands for public accountability. As a result, in order to respond to these demands, ways of administering quality assurance processes and systems have been created.

Added to institutions' increasing openness to external evaluations, these processes have been factors that have promoted organisational change within universities. This is particularly the case in the field of quality management, which has become a new field of action. Quality management involves academic and administrative aspects and generates new opportunities to perform professionally. To incorporate this new field into traditional university structures, institutional changes have occurred, which have led to the creation of new functions among other things. Said changes have also generated a certain professionalization of quality management in university education. This can be observed in the universities themselves and also in the external, public and private agencies responsible for certifying and accrediting educational quality. In this context, an even greater homogenisation and standardisation of certification and accreditation has also occurred. Chile is a Latin American country that has undergone important changes in this regard, due to the deregulated growth in the eighties and nineties that was protected by policies stimulating market behaviour.

This is exactly the area that this dissertation is focused on: the higher education scenario in Chile and the integration of new university actors into its institutions. In this country, this occurred in the middle of a process of change, of crises of confidence in these institutions and of adjustments to how their quality was regulated. It occurred in a context that has gone from being one of unquestioned credibility for university institutions to one in which suspicion and the demand for visible evidence to prove integrity now prevail. In this scenario and with the aim of achieving the accountability required, more and more professionals with the technical skills to take charge of managing the quality of university education are needed. This has been resolved through the incorporation of new - mainly professional - actors, as well as those who already exist, making up a new category of university personnel that specialises in generating, processing and validating evidence on how universities function. Their involvement brings with it new working backgrounds, professional development experiences and a greater understanding of university quality. All this is added to what already exists in university institutions, creating new opportunities and identities.

Chilean is a special case due to its history, which has made the rapid and deregulated expansion of tertiary education easier. In 1981, the military regime passed a law that

determined how the university system would function and the higher education system underwent a structural transformation. Until then, there were only eight universities in Chile - six private, non-profit ones and two state-run ones. In the following three decades, higher education in Chile experienced an unprecedented and almost unregulated expansion, both in the number of students registered and the number of participating institutions. The increase to and diversification of the number of higher education providers was aimed at meeting the challenge of increasing higher education provision. This was needed due to the pressure created by the expansion of secondary school education coverage. In 2002, there were approximately 520,000 students in higher education but, by 2014, this number had doubled to a total of 1,215,413 students registered at all levels at all institutions. With this, the country achieved a gross number of 60% of students aged 18 to 24 years old in higher education. Currently, there are 59 universities, 43 professional institutes and 54 technical training centres, making a total of 156 institutions offering higher education qualifications.

The demands for accountability, added to the specifics of the current economic situation in Chile (the existence of a neoliberal economic policy that promotes and regulates market behaviour) have influenced universities and led them to create new positions and functions, with the aim of implementing strategies that allow them to comply with an avalanche of new demands and diverse administrative requirements. Although this is a phenomenon that has been replicated in different countries, a large amount of the literature on the subject comes from Great Britain. In Chile, there are very few studies on this subject, which is why this dissertation suggests looking into this new institutional area and its actors in detail. In this scenario, the aim of this research has been to characterise the development of these new areas of action. An attempt has also been made to analyse the new functions and dynamics of the relationship between these new social actors and other university members. Specifically, the study has focused on analysing the field of managing the quality of university education and on characterising the profile of the professionals in charge of said area. In particular, its aims have been to explore its administrators' visions of the quality of higher education and analyse how said visions are brought together with the practical actions they are developing to ensure said quality in reality. The process of installing organisational areas to administer the processes used to ensure university quality is also analysed. Finally, the insertion of new professionals into this field of work is explored, with a special emphasis on how their professional identity is constructed.

The dissertation is organised into five chapters, beginning with a theoretical and historical exploration of the subject of the study and then moving on to a detailed analysis of the development of the new community of administrators in charge of ensuring quality in the university environment.

Chapter 1 provides the theoretical and conceptual framework that is the basis of the study. It is organised around three main themes: the conception of university quality, the administrative management of academic processes and the construction of a professional identity. As far as the conceptualisation of quality is concerned, the dissertation discusses the different perspectives and focuses of quality systems, distinguishing three different types: those that give priority to complying with internal aims, those that give priority to adjusting to external demands and a third group that is somewhere in between the two. In this way, continuity in the definitions that emerge between the two extremes is created, in which self-regulatory processes and the development and learning of teachers take precedence. At the other extreme, there are processes focused on institutional performance as a response to the outside demands orientated at establishing control. As a result of the conceptual discussion, the conclusion is that there are multiple meanings that can be attributed to said concept, depending on the position that it occupies in the system that defines it. As a result, it is inferred that this diversity of meanings has, in practice, led to different forms of implementing quality management processes.

Management in university education is the conceptual revision's second theme. The influence of giving a managerial focus to academic administration in universities, encouraged by globalisation and economies that favour the free market and competition, is discussed. In the same way, the influence of the managerial movement on university organisation is analysed, especially the redesign of administrative functions in line with the proposals of several British authors, especially Rosemary Deem and Celia Whitchurch. Evidence that highlights the fact that these focuses and management practices have an emphasis on efficiency and are guided by the logics of control and orientation towards complying with performance-related goals is revised. This logic has influenced universities in such a way that academic work has been remodelled, leading to the introduction of a series of changes, such as the incorporation of a company ethos. In this context, university governance policies have been developed, aimed more at the service of economic agendas with a market focus and on competition for resources. As a result, academics' control and work regulations have increased, something that usually falls to professional administrators, with authority being transferred from academics to administrators. As a result, these adjustments to administrative practices have led to academics losing control of how they organise their work and make decisions, with a large majority of these being transferred to non-academic staff. Finally, when tackling this topic, some of the ways of making the university education quality management process more technical are examined. This process has been introduced to institutions as a substitute for traditional focuses based on trust and academic work, creating managerial outlines based on the production of indicators and competition. In this way, the deviation from localised control of higher education quality is illustrated, going from a focus based on self-regulation and management using academic logic to one based on accountability to external entities.

Finally, the third theme that serves as a conceptual basis for the empirical study is related to the construction of professional identities that, in this text, is focused on academic administrators. Although professional identities have traditionally been defined using structured environments such as disciplines, the institutional limits and political demands of higher education have encouraged the emergence of a group that is ever more multi-professional and in which diversity and the diffusion of roles has blurred the boundaries between professional identities. The construction of a professional identity is conceptualised as an ongoing negotiation in the working environment. For this reason, the current university context becomes one of the main environments for the construction and reconstruction of the identities of academics and professional administrators, to the extent that their work is orientated towards projects that cross functional borders. These changes, therefore, do not only occur at an organisational level but also on an individual identity level. Diverse approaches analyse the conception of identity and its construction, in which three types of theoretical sources of tension are identified. First is the balance between the subjective process versus the social or collective one, regarding which the authors favour an approach that recognises the convergence of both as determining factors of identity. Second is the transient nature of identity, which alludes to the duration of identity construction, in which sensitivity to environmental influences is highlighted and in which it thus appears more reasonable to consider identity as a construction that evolves and can be modified. Third is the tension between a fragmented or multiple conception of identity and an integrated and unique one; a source of tension that the authors resolve by favouring the multiple identities that compete in the same person and are revealed according to the context.

In the specific case of those who occupy new functions in academic university administration, the lack of definition in this role is added to the fact that the terms 'administration' and 'management' are not only imprecise but have also been disqualified from use in the academic context. They are associated with undesirable bureaucracy, with the erosion of academic autonomy and with exaggerated accountability requirements. In this context, the construction of the academic administrators' professional identity is considered problematic, due to the invisibility and lack of definition of their functions and the complexity of their relationships and interaction with the academic body. During this discussion, gender, age and other attributes that influence the identity process will also be revealed.

The empirical study analyses evidence from a sample of professionals and Chilean university academics whose functions are orientated towards managing the quality of their institutions. The evidence was collected during a specific period of time in 2013. Before then, a series of relevant events had occurred in Chile, giving the study its historical context. The event that most marked Chilean society at the end of the twentieth

century was the military coup in 1973. This event definitely had an impact on the university system, halting its evolution and that of the quality models that had emerged as a result of the changes that occurred. The dictatorial military regime and the educational reform of 1981 laid the basis for a proliferation of universities in Chile and for the beginning of higher education's commercial orientation. Then came a re-democratisation period (1990-2010), during which control mechanisms were created within the framework of institutions that were practically unregulated, creating public bodies to enforce them and passing a quality assurance law that is still valid up to the present day. In the last five years, citizen movements have become stronger - especially student ones - and an extensive debate has emerged about the quality and financing of higher education. In this context, the regulation of university quality creates tension between those who promote self-regulation and those who favour external control, accountability using indicators of efficiency, the public and private spheres and the role of the State.

Data was gathered in two stages, using a mixed and sequential research design. The first stage used an online questionnaire in a digital format, which was answered by 75 of the 134 members of the Quality Assurance Management Units invited to take part from 48 national universities. In the second stage, twenty of these professionals were interviewed in person to find out more about the extensive dynamics of the aspects initially researched, exploring their conceptions of the quality of higher education and finding out more about the specific tasks and processes of identity development. Systemising this information, in the light of the conceptual framework, allowed us to characterise the dynamics and significance attributed to both quality and the work of this new group of professionals dedicated to the management of quality in universities and to understand how they construct identity.

Systemisation of the empirical information is presented in three chapters that advance in order, going from broad premises up to the final chapter that tackles the last item analysed - the administrators of quality assurance processes in universities in their immediate environment.

The concepts of the higher education quality of the professionals and academics responsible for the units of quality assurance in Chilean universities are examined. A range of conceptual distinctions are identified, which reveal important conceptual and operational ambiguities regarding quality assurance. There are also differences between the idealisation of the conception of education quality and reality; standardised and automatized procedures are observed in the institutions, in which consultants have a significant innovative, dynamic and constructive nature. As a result of the most recurring conceptions of education quality, a warning is issued regarding the fact that these are usually assimilated into the results of accreditation almost as if they were synonymous, making a complex concept equivalent to an instrumental operation. The prevailing

discourse on academic consultants' quality assurance is mainly framed within a conceptual scope that varies between complying with the demands of the surroundings and adjusting internally to its intentions. However, in practice, the preferred conceptions indicate that quality evaluation is carried out through adjustments to external standards. Typical business models have been introduced, which modify academia using a logic that makes everything more technical and rational, highlighting sources of tension. A factor that has favoured making quality instrumental is that of associating accreditation with incentives such as access to sources of state funding and the commercialisation of education, which is subject to fluctuations in offer and demand, to the fight to win students and for resources and prestige. In this context, publicity and marketing the results of the accreditation process as evidence of quality have been taken advantage of.

Quality administrators are installed in new university substructures specialised in the function of educational quality management, typically known as quality assurance units. The creation of these units was motivated by conditions in the country, where competition and a strong market orientation take precedence. More complex management systems were introduced, which has also led to the incorporation of managerial models common to the business sector. These units have made up functional areas that have turned into a third place or grey area between the dominions that have traditionally differentiated the academic environment from the administrative one. Their installation has been gradual and has become widespread over the years in all higher education institutions in Chile, with a very similar profile between different universities almost irrespective of their geographical location, governance structure or property or between those with an orientation towards teaching or research. The focus that emerges from the business strategies introduced has benefited the institutions. Evidence shows advances in management modernisation, with a positive impact on the quality of programs and institutions. However, at the same time, a warning is issued about the risk of applying typical business management strategies without taking care to adapt them to academic culture. In this area, the position of these units within the university organisation is relevant. The majority of these quality assurance units depend, hierarchically, on executive managers in the university's upper echelons. The proximity to high-up authorities seems to either have an ambivalent effect on those with whom this unit interacts or is doubly linked to it. On one hand, it makes it easier to pass on indications and requirements to those below, to the extent that it is a component of the institution that is legitimised by the higher hierarchal levels. However, on the other hand, their actions can be associated with insistence and auditing, which may cause resistance and, as a result, hinder the internalisation and popularity of a culture involving evaluations and ongoing improvement. As a result, it seems that these units are more connected to internal regulations and the higher-up authority that exercises greater control when responding to the external demands of accountability than to an intra-institutional connection with academic culture and university tradition.

Lastly, if the analysis is based on the individual administrators who assure quality, a profile emerges describing them as professionals with a level of higher education who have shown an interest in specialising in matters similar to the functions they carry out. They are mainly women, particularly in positions that answer to a single, usually male, authority in an academic position. No one profession predominates over others regarding who carries out this function. Little by little, two subgroups have been formed: young professionals with academic positions and the academics with a long working career who usually run these units. For the latter, quality assurance units are an opportunity to gradually withdraw from the university environment, reinventing themselves and adapting their identity to a new function and reality such as administrating the quality of higher education, without abruptly abandoning what has been their field for such a long time. In a certain way, it gives them the opportunity to stay in its midst without dealing with the typical sources of tension present in the current demands made of academic productivity.

This hybrid formation of quality assurance units - young professionals and career academics - and the interaction between the academic and administrative aspects of their functions embodies what Whitchurch (2007) calls quasi-academic territory. It can be hypothesised that this hybrid condition must continue to conserve an academic perspective in the area of quality assurance management. Regarding the profile of the abilities needed to carry out these functions, no prior definition exists: specialisation is achieved through practice itself. It is paradoxical that an analysis of the academic offer both in Chile and the rest of the world in the field of university management reveals a range of programmes – diplomas, Masters or PhDs – that aim to create university management specialists with sub-specialisations in areas such as quality assurance. The profile of quality consultants in the next few years will probably require specific abilities. Those who currently make up this new stratum are pioneers who are introduced into organisations with deep-rooted cultures to take charge of the emerging extra-academic functions.

In the process of defining their role, a shared identity does not immediately appear. Up until now, this identity has seemed to base itself mainly on the common obstacles they must face and the constant efforts they must make to validate their work in the academic environment. They feel they have to accept the invisible value of their function within the university. The impression is that they are founders both of the profession and of the process of introducing the importance of the concept of quality into the universities they work at. During this process of defining their identity and in an environment in which the ‘other’s’ (the academics’) identity is more defined and is deeply rooted in their discipline, this new actor must recur to using strategies that help reduce its own anxiety in undefined and ambiguous situations. To do so, it recurs to the instrumental use of that which is more manageable and definite; operational methods and administrative aspects. Therefore, beyond what is practical, accreditation can perhaps

be understood as something that eases the anxiety related to having to prove what makes you different. Achieving one's own identity is related to recognising the possibility of being accepted by others according to what one is and what one proposes. If there is team work, common ground is created in which everyone is seen as a relevant piece of the whole: it is this specific process which still seems to be in progress.

Finally, it should be considered that the study that led to this dissertation was developed in a timeframe involving a specific four year period, which allowed for real-time follow-up of the events influencing the processes studied: a new President of the Republic and ruling political party, reform projects for higher education, new laws, changes to the authorities in charge of the State's accreditation bodies, the revelation of fraudulent acts in higher education institutions, the strengthening of social movements and changes to accreditation demands, for example. This has probably been the period with the greatest concentration of significant events in higher education than any other in Chile. Moreover, the most recent events and experiences are not even registered in these pages. For example, in the last few months, a new project to reform higher education has been discussed in Parliament, two new state universities have been created and students from the private universities founded after the eighties have joined in the demonstrations and shown their discontent publicly, demanding equity. The story is developing as we speak; an old scenario with new actors who are writing their own script for us to follow and analyse.