



AUTONOMY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE: REFLECTIONS FOR LATIN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

At present, universities have to respond to social demands, without losing autonomy. For this reason, it must perform processes in the most transparent way possible so that society knows and endorses what happens in it. Quality assurance in universities tends to promote autonomy and decentralization, but it is a challenge to focus more on solving the main problems of society.

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INTRODUCTION

The Cordova's Movement is a century old. In this period, has been a benchmark for all Latin American universities in matters of autonomy and conquests against the hegemonic power of national Governments. In opposition to totalitarian public policies, these institutions have raised the conquests of Cordova, a reference that comes to our days renewed, but with the aspiration of staying for several centuries in the future. Autonomy is the way we are able to regulate ourselves with our norms or standards; It is not an absence of external control, considering it an interference, but because we are able to know the things that we do, the goals that we have, how we do what is ours and what impact we have on society. It must be subordinated to the social demands of development, not to political whims of the Governments in the countries of the region. The development guidelines of the universities are established by the different groups of actors that exert pressure on the institution through claims, such as greater access, academic excellence, more grants and policies favoring group traditionally have been infringed.

Autonomy ceased to be an aspiration to become an inherent condition of universities. The different stakeholders of the university community defend it from their positions. Authorities mention it in their speeches and are present in the elections of the leaders, who are elected with mechanisms themselves, not taxes. In addition, its decisions are not influenced by political power (although not in all cases). However, in the management of university processes is where it is considered that autonomy has to win spaces. The university has to design clear processes, preventing external entities causing entropy in their system. One of the processes that has been used systematically by national governments to try to influence the university system is quality management, according to the perception of university authorities and academics. Most governments, through accreditation agencies, dictate standards for its universities, that if they are not met can lead to the closure of the institution, as has happened in several Latin American countries in the last 25 years. The philosophy of quality assurance is adjusted to the demands of autonomy that justify universities to resist other forms of quality assessment. Leaving behind external control, assurance policies guarantee the necessary inputs for higher education institutions can obtain the expected results, based on the premise that in order to obtain a result, the pertinent inputs must be guaranteed. Key stakeholders in quality assurance

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have to be the universities themselves, as happens with autonomy. Does not occur in a similar manner with the evaluation and accreditation interests passing into the hands of the State and other interest groups. However, society as a whole needs to trust that the university is being consistent with the social mission that corresponds to it, which is to form future generations with the ability to transform their environment, being sensitive to the problems that affect us (Albach, 2018).

The application of quality assurance generates a certain degree of autonomy and decentralization. Its design is, essentially, a suit to the current measure and aspirations of each university center. Through this, contract commitments and resources are managed to contribute to the achievement of the goals. Quality assurance in universities favors autonomy, because it allows institutions to have their own strategy to raise quality indicators, without the need for external questions. Autonomy and quality assurance in universities have to go, inexorably, step by step, hand in hand. In our opinion that they have to be two *sine qua non* conditions, the contemporary university in Latin America loses its reason of being. The first reason, it keeps the institution intact before the governments and public policies that intend to use the university campuses for their purposes; the second because it guarantees that the right things are being done with the necessary resources and focused on social demands (Cuño, 2016).

This binomial is a formula for dealing with excesses of governments and making universities more relevant, closer to social problems, promoting technological development and innovation, proposing novel curricula, making adequate use of the financial resources available, providing more access to a quality university education. In the political and academic debate there have been silences accomplices of guilt before the society of the whole system of higher education. Neither the State in public policies has to guarantee, nor the evaluation agency controls what it has to monitor, nor does the university do everything it can and must do. There are times of mercantilist, evaluator and positivist boom in Latin American universities, which hopefully happen soon and do not do much harm to society.

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