

QUALITY AS POLITICS

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When I was asked to speak on ‘Quality as Imperialism’ some time ago, it seemed fairly easy: It meant looking at the way in which new quality assurance agencies developed, the way in which they processed the information of more experienced agencies, usually in developed countries, and analyzing whether this process managed to take into account the local culture and the particular features of higher education in a given setting, or whether it was dominated by foreign, colonialistic approaches.

The mental picture I had in mind went somehow like this: Quality assurance in Latin America has become the business of a certain number of academics, most of whom have attended graduate school in the US or Europe and who keep up to date not only in their respective disciplinary areas but also in current affairs by reading Time, the Economist or The New York Review of Books. Most of us also travel a lot, to see what is happening in other parts of the world, to share experiences and learn from each other. In this process, we tend to import developed countries’ definitions of quality, and their corresponding models to measure, promote it and guarantee it. This was the process I was expected to analyze and comment on, trying to evaluate its relevance to the needs of national higher education systems and its eventual dependence on some ‘imperial’ way of doing things.

All this is still true, and relevant, albeit in a secondary and somewhat narrow perspective, and I will probably get to it anyway. But as I started preparing for and writing this paper, it seemed necessary to look at things in a different way, starting with the concepts I was trying to relate, and this led me in a different direction. Most of what I am going to say is tentative, and by this I mean that I don’t really feel certain about many of these things. I do feel certain that they should be said and discussed, even though I could not predict what the outcomes of those discussions could be – but academic discussions should be open-ended, without predictable outcomes, so I will not worry about that. The point I will try to make is that what really matters now is the extent of globalization, and of its impact not only in our definitions of quality and of the methods we use for determining it, but also on the current development of universities throughout the world.

Imperialism or globalization?

The first question that emerged was about the appropriateness of the concept of imperialism. Imperialism means an explicit will to conquer markets through political domination, and I do not really see this happening today, not in the HE field. Imperialism needs an Empire, or a close substitute, to want to dominate. Imperialism, in a peculiarly comforting way, requires the presence of someone who wishes to impose its culture, its demands, its politics, its economic priorities on the rest, who may or may not try to resist this imposition. And if there is any resistance, it is addressed against an identifiable foe.

What we see now is different. There is an imposition of culture, politics and economic priorities, but what is not there is the identifiable foe, or the explicit will to conquer. We call this phenomenon ‘globalization’, and in many cases, have an ambivalent reaction to it. But as it frequently happens, the same concept hides a number of meanings, many of which are contradictory, and some of which, at least, may help explain our ambivalence.

For some people, we are currently witnessing a transformation that is so radical that “none of the old ways of thinking and doing apply any more”. In this view – celebrated by some and lamented by others – the sovereignty of states has declined; everyone’s ability to resist the rules of the market has disappeared; our possibility of cultural autonomy has been virtually annulled; and the stability of all our identities has come into serious question (Wallerstein, 1999)ⁱ. Others contend that these processes have existed at least since Columbus sailed West to go to the East, but that what is different is the degree of expansion in the trade and transfer of capital, labor, production, consumption, information and technology, which might be enough to amount to a qualitative change (Miyoshi, 1998)ⁱⁱ.

In either case – whether it is a new phenomenon, or a new dimension of colonialism – there are some common features that we might all agree on:

The first and foremost has to do with economics, in terms of the expansion and intensification of international trade and investment, which go beyond true ‘internationalism’ insofar as they are no longer linked to the action of nation-states. Multinational and transnational corporations operate on a world wide market, or rather, in a diversity of markets segmented by types of consumers, and not by national or geographical considerations. Capital trading in this same global perspective has shown a spectacular growth, and both have been made possible and enhanced by the de-regulation of national markets.

Then there is the political dimension, characterized by the organization of transnational governmental and regulatory institutions and by the diffusion of neo-liberal political ideology and institutional forms. It has also been pointed out that globalization is linked to a world wide shift towards democracy, but this should be looked into more carefully: while formally democratic institutions and practices have been increasingly adopted in most countries since the 1970s, substantive democratization is threatened by the shift in power away from states. Paradoxically, as government has democratized, the scope and effectiveness of government decision-making has contracted. Young people are aware of this, and not surprisingly, do not seem interested in what we, the older generation, consider an essential part of democracy: registering to vote, or actually taking an active part in electoral discussions.

The third dimension is the cultural one, linked often but not always to the spread of Western ideas and cultural practices. This has certainly been associated with the growth of particular types of TNC, those who own and control the mass media, notably television channels and the advertising agencies and therefore, to the spread of particular patterns of consumption and a culture and ideology of consumerism at the global level.

The point in these features is that they show how the world is moving away from an international perspective (focused and defined at the level of nation-states) into a global, or transnational one, built on transnational corporations at the economic level, a transnational capitalist class at the political level, and the culture-ideology of consumerism at the cultural level (Sklair, 1995)ⁱⁱⁱ.

There are many instances in which it is possible to show how these features are expressed in different countries – from Indonesian women making Nike footwear to babies all over the world drinking Nestle formula, from people in South Teheran looking at the few available TV sets in order to see *Baywatch*, to book buying through Amazon.com or the development of E*Trade.

In this context, maybe one of the most surprising things is the relative absence of universities – or, in fact, education in general – from most analyses of globalization. They are clearly not considered part of the transnational corporate world (even though transnational higher education is becoming an important part of the total exports in many countries), they are not recognized as part of the ‘transnational capitalist class’ (which includes TNC executives, globalizing state bureaucrats, politicians and professionals, and consumerist elites) and are not mentioned at all when describing the cultural level of globalization, which is dominated by an analysis of the media.

This may be simply the effect of some bias on the part of many analysts, who tend to focus on economic variables even, in many cases, when referring to cultural aspects. It would be interesting to explore that issue further, but here I will only focus on the ways in which globalization, as described above, has impacted on the world of higher education, and how its features can be discovered in universities.

Changes in higher education

Most analyses of higher education mention some trends that impact on its development and affect the decisions that have to be made. These megatrends, as they have been called, exert their influence on universities everywhere, regardless of their physical location, traditions, current practices or aspirations:

Maybe the most important phenomenon in this respect, and the one that has had a stronger impact on universities and their nature has been the **increase of demand for higher education and the realization that universities should be open to ever growing and more diverse groups of students**. While increased access to primary and secondary education has an obvious and immediate impact on the demand for higher education, it has combined with the expansion of access to tertiary education of other, non-traditional, age groups. The report of the Special Group on Higher Education and Society commissioned by the World Bank states that “higher education is indisputably the new frontier of educational development in a growing number of countries”. It also shows that the number of adults with some higher education in developing countries has increased by a factor of 2.5 between 1975 and 1990, and total enrolment has grown from 28 million in 1980 to about 47 million in 1995. (IDRB, 2000^{iv}). While this is a world wide phenomenon, it is nevertheless linked to major imbalances, both among countries (enrolment in industrial

countries is five to six times that of developing countries) and within countries (where the higher income, male, urban population is definitely over-represented).

The change from elite to mass higher education has meant a process of horizontal differentiation¹ (or **privatization**) through the development of an increasingly important number of private institutions, many of which are run on a profit basis. Private institutions enrol over 50% of the total number of students in countries such as the Philippines, Korea, Indonesia, Colombia, India, Brazil, Paraguay or Nicaragua and in many countries, private institutions make up a significant percentage of the respective higher education systems.

Privatization is also associated to the decrease of public funding for higher education, which in turn has pushed universities into a **diversification of funding sources**, most of which come from the private sector: Tuition fees, income from services rendered to external clients, contracts for specific types of research, mean in practice a privatization of income. Thus, funding is closely linked to market considerations, which makes institutional decisions highly dependent on funding opportunities, usually with a short term outlook.

As secondary education becomes universal, higher education is the main instrument for differentiation in a very competitive labor market. Technological development and economic growth have also been associated to an increasingly educated population. The growing demand for higher education is no longer limited to young people, but also to adults who want either to upgrade or update their qualifications, or get a new degree or specialize in new fields. In most countries, the income earned by graduates of higher education, and more specifically, university graduates, is several times that of secondary school or technical graduates. The **economic value of higher education** is becoming more apparent both to prospective students and to employers.

The **transnational** aspect is also present in higher education. For the US, the UK, Australia and Spain higher education exports provide a substantial portion of their national product, and multinational corporations – such as Sylvan Systems – are buying universities in different parts of the world (the US, Spain, Chile and other countries), in order to bring them together into a transnational scheme.

Consumerism is not absent, either. In many universities, the number of students enrolled in a course is what finally determines whether the course is offered or not, without regard to contents. In other cases, decisions on what programmes to offer are made in terms of the demands of enrolling students, who decide mainly on the basis of marketing reports, and not on disciplinary or professional considerations.

All these trends have changed the social role of universities, including diversifying HE systems to include not only universities but a variety of institutions, and legitimizing diversity among universities.

¹ Different from vertical differentiation (that is, the coexistence of universities and non-university institutions), which is in general, the response to a growing need for professional diversity.

This is an important aspect of the development of higher education systems and their way of responding to new social priorities, which is, of course, the way in which institutions adapt and survive. The downside of it is that, as a consequence, it is increasingly difficult to understand the structure of higher education, make sense of the way in which it operates or take advantage of the opportunities it offers. While this difficulty is expectable in the case of the general public, prospective students and many employers, it is also a problem for academics, policy makers, government officials and quality assurance agencies. So, at the same time that higher education is becoming an essential part of life for increasing numbers of people, there are no clear maps of a complex territory.

This complexity gets translated into two opposing and contradictory views of higher education, which co-exist but are not explicitly recognized as such – even as they impose different rationales on the ways things are done, or should be done.

One is the traditional view, whose primary concerns are the mastery of disciplines, the enhancement of qualified and selected students, the development of research guided mainly by intellectual or disciplinary priorities, in a collegial and academic perspective. The other is what we may call the *operational* view, which has developed as a consequence of the trends mentioned above, and therefore, turned the university into a different kind of institution, which tries to respond to the demands of this new context under the global ideology of consumerism. In this view, knowledge is defined mostly as information or the ability to solve problems, students are considered ‘products’ or, at best, clients; faculty members become teachers (or facilitators) rather than educators and research is often translated into development projects or action research, and is frequently funded by corporations wishing to improve their position in the marketplace.

There are many examples of the pervasiveness of this operational view. The President of one of the largest of U.S. research universities made it clear when he defined his vision for the university: He emphasized the importance of technology for ‘increased productivity, higher living standards, and faster economic growth’, and even though he recognized that some people might consider this dangerous, ‘raising the specter that universities will abandon their pursuit of fundamental knowledge in favour of short term research with a quick payoff’ he nevertheless considered industry’s growing interest in university research ‘more an opportunity than a threat’.² (Miyoshi, 1998). In the UK and other countries, programmes are being refashioned so as to encourage entrepreneurial and enterprising skills and aptitudes across the disciplines, including the humanities. The growing emphasis on competency and outcome-based approaches to curriculum design also points out to the need to enhance wider operational capacities of graduates, in an increasingly uniform and pre-specified manner, described by expected outcomes (Barnett, 1994). A report on European universities highlights the way in which new approaches to work and corporate organization have blurred the boundaries between the world of universities, industries, research and work, and indicates that universities have had to adjust their teaching to part time students and faculty, continuing education and shortened curricula, and their research to the need for results that are immediately applicable to concrete and specific problems.

² R.C. Atkinson, President of the University of California, quoted by Masao Miyoshi, op. cit.

(Bricall, 2000^v). In many parts of the world, including my own, science and technology parks, joint industry-university ventures and the rationale behind decisions on programme offerings and courses taught reflect the principle of corporate economy in control of universities. The title of Burton R. Clark's *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: organizational pathways of transformation* is certainly suggestive of the same approach.

This, in fact, has translated into a new *ideological* way of interpreting universities and their social role. The concept of 'ideology' in this respect extends the traditional approach - centered in class domination - to other forms of domination, including the economic and cultural aspects that are imbedded in the idea of globalization, but shares with that approach the need to make sense of these domination patterns and the demands of allegiance from believers, making its interpretation of reality a *Weltanschauung* which claims to be the only valid one.

In this view, universities must focus on a concept of *operational* competence, essentially reproducing a societal interest in performance, and reducing knowledge to a commodity that is traded according to the interests of consumers. Efficiency and effectiveness are the key words in evaluating performance, and these are seen within an economic framework, in which value-for-money and accountability are essential parameters.

The coexistence of the academic and the operational views has generated a feeling of uncertainty within universities. There is a widespread feeling that the current departmentalization of knowledge is no longer adequate, and disciplinary boundaries are blurring. Academics find it difficult to agree on what should constitute the substance being taught. While accepting that the university must take into account society's definitions of knowledge and learning, which are being shaped by social and technological change, it is not easy to see how this can be done within the constraints we have already spoken about and without sacrificing the commitment many academics feel towards traditional research and teaching processes.

In many cases this is resolved through the transformation of the academic view into a different ideological perspective, which closes ranks behind an idea of objective knowledge, guided by a search for truth. Its emphasis is mainly on propositional thinking, without a focus on the relationships between thought and action.

The trouble with this perspective is not only that it is out of touch with many of present social priorities, but that in being so, it puts at risk the social valuing of knowledge, or at least, of knowledge defined in those terms. In a context of mass higher education, the notion of socially unaccountable institutions, dedicated to the development of knowledge unrelated to action does not seem to be valid any longer.

And so, what about quality?

The concern with quality has emerged precisely because of the uncertainties and the tensions we have already outlined. Society and its members are demanding that *someone* provides a measure of quality assurance, in the face of massification, the need to be

accountable for scarce public resources and to provide a measure of value for money in the case of private resources dedicated to higher education.

In response to this concern, many countries have established quality assurance schemes. In the last INQAAHE conference in India, 52 countries were represented, and the Network has over 100 members. Many of these countries have been operating their QA schemes for a number of years, so it would seem that definitions of quality are already clear. And yet, there are a number of questions open, which, in many cases, have not been directly addressed by these same QA agencies.

Quality is essentially a relative term, expressed in terms of social and individual desirability. So, when we are compelled to look at universities in a certain way, quality can only be defined in a way that is consistent with it. Definitions of quality are never neutral, or innocent. They are about balances of power, within higher education and between higher education and other social actors.

In the first part of this presentation I tried to show that what is really being imposed on all of us – and not only on developing countries – is an ideological definition of universities, emerging from a globalized view of the world. In this sense, what we see is not the imposition of certain definitions of quality by developed countries on developing ones, but rather the ‘colonization’ of universities by a foreign ideology, imposed by a globalized economy on higher education systems throughout the world.

Now I would like to suggest that the definitions of quality that we use are a way of providing a measure of legitimacy to this view of the university, and that this impacts differently on universities whether they are a part of developed or developing countries.

Globalization and the concept of quality

Quality assurance is often presented as a technical matter, which needs to be dealt with in terms of handbooks and procedures, with the general implication that principles and standards can be taken from one country to another with little or no modifications – it is the way in which they are applied by peers or external evaluators what makes the necessary adjustment to local conditions.

Quality assurance has been linked to three main underlying rationales (Harvey, 1999)^{vi}: accountability, compliance and improvement.

- Accountability means that universities must not only be explicit about where they spend the money but also show that they provide good value for the money they receive. But who should universities be accountable to? And how is ‘good value’ defined?
- Evaluation usually demands compliance with the preferences of policy makers, external stakeholders or providers of funding. The problem, then, is shifted to the way in which those preferences are established: how are the goals defined, and what is the role of different stakeholders in their establishment? What are the agendas behind the identification of preferences, or the definition of priorities?

- Improvement is probably the goal of quality assurance that is most frequently stated. It seems exactly what QA is about: to help institutions to acquire the necessary inputs, improve processes and raise the standards of outcomes appears to be an uncontroversial goal. It is necessary, though, to ask what is to be improved, in what ways, and for whose benefit.

All these questions can – and usually are – answered from the point of view of the operational ideology described before. Good value, the goals for compliance, the standards for improvement, are usually defined by governments, external stakeholders and even from university officials (witness the statements by the President of the University of California already mentioned) within the framework of this specific view of higher education in general and universities in particular.

The definition of quality, then, is biased because the definition of universities is biased, either in terms of the ideology of tradition, that tries to keep things as they have been in spite of the contextual and social changes higher education is experiencing, or in terms of a new ideology that pervades the way in which we view higher education, and which is the consequence of a market-oriented, consumerist, global view of the world.

The problem with ideologies is that as they pretend to be the only valid view, and dismiss other interpretations as wrong, or outdated, or interest-driven, they become invisible not only to those that believe in them, but also to many others who do not take the time or have the tools to detect their true character.

Quality in the developing countries

Developing countries live with the same problems already described, only more so. Our higher education systems developed under the guidance of academics who came (mainly from Europe) to live, teach and carry out research among us more than a century ago. They evolved through the influence of other academics, coming from the same or other HE environments, or through the work of our own scholars who went to study abroad and came back with their degrees and their views on what universities should look like.

During the eighties, globalization and the opening of developing countries to the demands and styles of a market-oriented economy seemed the sure way to development. Universities were no exception, and what has been said before about the operational ideology accurately describes many of the processes that took place in Latin American universities everywhere.

But globalization is not the same in the developing world and in the developed countries. Many of the features discussed above have had their impact in Latin America, but the range in which they operate is different. We talk about massification of enrolment, but we seldom enrol more than 25% of the 18 – 24 cohort – and even then, many of those students do not belong to the corresponding age group. We know about technological development, and the impact of information technologies, the pervasiveness of the Internet and the possibilities that open up with distance or on-line education, but many of our students do not own computers or have full access to Internet. We know that knowledge is power, and

that investment in the production of knowledge may be more worthwhile than in other areas, but competition is fierce, and to enter it demands a level of previous knowledge and skills most of our countries lack; thus, the 'knowledge gap' may become an unsurmountable obstacle, especially for upper middle income countries, which feel the pressure to bridge it. In the transnational division of labour, we are not supposed to produce knowledge, only to buy it and use it.

So, developing countries are in a much more difficult position: not only we have to assure quality, we must develop the conditions that make quality possible. The challenge to identify what is quality in higher education is thus much more urgent and essential.

What we have done in many cases is to adopt the same measures of quality that developed countries use. We look at the RIBA for evaluation of our architectural schools, to ABET for engineering, to the LCME in the US for medical studies. We translate the standards regional agencies use to accredit institutions in the US, and the benchmarks of the QAA in the UK. We know that we must adjust those standards to our national requirements, but we also know that in the world we live in, it is essential that our standards are not very different from those applied elsewhere.

Every model is made up of a significant cluster of elements, some of which are essential to the substantive aspects of the model, others being part of the context in which those essential elements acquire meaning or are able to operate. When a model is imported, the significant cluster is broken, as the context into which it is imported is, by definition, different. Unless the model itself is re-defined, it may prove to be quite dysfunctional to the intended goals.

The challenge that we face is precisely the redefinition of quality models, which starts by identifying which elements are essential in terms of what we expect higher education to accomplish, and which are rather aspects that are linked to non-essential, particular features of academic life, which make sense in their original environment, but not necessarily in ours.

In order to do this, issues such as the present condition of universities, the range and scope of their role in modern society, the requirements of the student body, the features of research, the need for scholarship, and the demands of external stakeholders must be made an integral part of the agenda for research and discussion. It has been said that universities carry out research on all kinds of fields, except their own. If we want to rescue universities from the distortion that the acritical acceptance of globalization and its accompanying models imply for the definition of what constitutes quality in higher education, this must change.

I have said that this is an urgent task for us in the developing countries. I think it is at least as urgent for developed countries, because if we do not manage to transcend the ideological views of higher education, our work will be continually impoverished.

We must move from effectiveness to understanding, not to be less effective, but rather to take effectiveness to higher levels. But in so doing, understanding cannot be just an

intellectual exercise. It must be constructive, and organized to develop solutions, or imaginative possibilities for discussion. (Barnett, 1994).

Are we ready to do this? We say that we want higher education to be an opportunity for equity, for better opportunities for personal, social and professional development, for the better understanding of complex and diverse societies, for the development of truly democratic institutions.

This will not happen on its own. It demands imagination and courage – hope lies in the intelligence and collective will of policy developers, government officials, quality assurance agencies and researchers. The question then seems to be – do we want to fight back?

Quality assurance mechanisms are not irrelevant to this. They can legitimise either the traditional or the operational aspects of higher education, and be colonized – or globalized – by consumerism and short term effectiveness, or they can help, by putting into their own definition of quality the need to address these issues systematically, and translate them into new – or at least, revised – statements of goals and objectives that take into account what must be preserved of the traditions of higher education, and what must change to take into account new social requirements!

After all, most of what QA agencies do is to make urgent what is important. And to recapture quality in higher education is too important to miss.

ⁱ I. Wallerstein, *Globalization or the Age of Transition? Long Term View of the Trajectory of the World System*, Fernand Braudel Center, 1999.

ⁱⁱ M. Miyoshi, “Globalization” and the University, in F. Jameson and M. Miyoshi (eds.), *The Cultures of Globalization*, Duke University Press, 1998

ⁱⁱⁱ L. Sklair, *Social Movements and Global Capitalism*, in F. Jameson and M. Miyoshi (eds.), *op. cit.*

^{iv} IDRB/The World Bank, (2000), “Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise”, Washington D.C.

^v J.M. Bricall & J.J. Brunner, *Universidad Siglo XXI. Europa y América Latina. Regulación y Financiamiento*, Documentos Columbus sobre Gestión Universitaria, Paris, 2000.

^{vi} L. Harvey, *Evaluating the Evaluators*, Opening keynote presentation at the V INQAAHE Conference, Santiago, 1999.