Measuring quality in Chilean higher education institutions (HEI’s): inclusion of student-related variables

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Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are responsible for providing one of the most relevant services in modern times. The education they provide not only enables students to achieve personal and professional goals, but also contributes to social and human development. Moreover, HEIs become decisive later to work on certain fields, pursue academic grades or be part of some group/organization (Lachwitz, 2012). As the National Council of Higher Education from Colombia states, the higher education can transform the social reality of the countries, and such potential demands continuous improvements on its quality (CESU, 2014).

In order to know how to enhance the quality of higher education, universities and governmental organizations have included several variables in their studies. In broad terms, most of the factors used to measure quality could be classified as follows: academic results (standardized test, selection mechanisms, student performance); institutional achievements (accreditation, scientific production, degrees); and market conditions (student demand, public image, financial politics).

This taxonomy is provisory, since there are as much variables as researches made. However, this three groups will be widely used in this work due to its simplicity and distinctions (which will be described in more detail below). Researchers often select and measure many of them, blending dimensions to supplement quantitative and qualitative methodologies. As Latif, Latif, Farooq and Ullah (2019) mentions, higher education has grown exponentially and also students and parents involved, thus new approches to quality measurement have to be able to capture these diversity through multiple instruments.

As a result of the measurements, HEIs are usually listed or ordered in national/international rankings. This allows to people recognize which universities (UES) have better and worst quality levels. Subsequently, students can decide where to study in light of this information, rewarding those outstanding UES with their enrollment and punishing those relegated without trying to entry there (Alarcón, 2019). In addition, two facts must be considered. First, higher education works under similar conditions than a market, with supply and demand fluctuations; this force UES to compete. Second, the majority of the HEI’s have to collect economical resources through student’s payments, either familiar/personal money or scholarships.

All these points shall be considered to analyze the measurement of quality in higher education, including some problems related with the variables mentions above that have led researchers to propose new ones. Over the last ten years have increased the studies that suggest to use student-related variables in measurement procedures (Ali, Zhou, Hussain, Nair and Ragavan, 2016; Adán, Poblete, Angulo, Loncomilla and Muñoz, 2016; Rodríguez and Padilla, 2016; Teeroovengadum, Kamalanabhan and Keshwar, 2016; Latif et al. 2019). Student opinions, expectations, perceptions and satisfaction have become helpful to complement traditional measures (academic, institutional and market), which tend to omit information from these stakeholders.

However, to comprehend better where this attention comes from, a literature review is needed. Therefore, the following paragraphs analyze these questions more in detail and present a brief discussion between the international and Chilean higher education context.

*Quality measurement: its framework and some features*

First of all, despite the fact that stakeholders use and discuss about ‘quality’, there is not a unique definition or meaning for this adjective/noun (Ali et al. 2016). In HEIs there are many dimensions and variables linked to this concept, and different studies present or review distinct ways to understand it and work on it; this is one of the reasons why quality is being widely studied and specialists continue searching for criteria to measure it. Regarding to the literature, there are two schools or ways to comprehend quality measurement. On the one hand, researchers and stakeholders that see education as a service, students like consumers and quality as a result of high performance on objective criteria; on the other hand, there are those who propose the student’s perception, evaluation and opinions as raw material for quality improvements.

To begin with, inside the first school there are researchers that propose to measure quality based on the HEIs outcomes and results in standardized tests and national rankings. For example, Cases (2020) explains that results of standardized university selection tests allow institutions to control who gets in, which facilitates academic work and reduces the need for supports.

From this standpoint, HEIs are responsible for giving specialized and pertinent training to students, hence they should get high levels of achievement in the mechanisms that evaluate their preparation. Principles that are widely accepted among HEIs across the world, in particular because it delivers objective evidence to stakeholders

According to Cornejo and Redondo (2007), HEIs should be essentially concerned for students’ performance, scientific production of professors and national rankings, because quality is equal to hold an outstanding position in the market. The competition is highlighted as an essential indicator of quality, and it should be measured through rankings and classification models that show to students how HEIs cover academic, scientific, collaborative and standardized features before they enroll on them.

As it was mentioned before, market logics and principles are extensively use in these quality measurement initiatives. In fact, some researchers suggest that HEIs will probably work on and improve their quality aspects if they are convinced that those results are decisive to maintain their functions. For example, Williamson (2008) recommends massifying the access of public funds to study in higher education and cutting the state economical support down; these policies would stimulate the competition amidst UES because of the resources they need would depend on the enrollment (tuition and fees) achieved. In the same line, other studies mention that quality mirrors the HEIs capacity to manage their resources and needs appropriately, comparing the educational results obtained with the investment demanded to attain them (Cáceres, 2008).

In the background, these perspectives argue that students, treated like consumers, will enroll in those HEIs that offer quality service and show attractive qualities, that is, a good public image, a high-ranking position, and all sort of marketing strategies. Quality measurement should be focus on these features, and HEIs should maintain open communication channels with the public in order to keep them updated about their service. Students are conceived like consumers that make decisions based on their perception and evaluation of the UES or colleges available in the market. When they enroll in some institution, they are rewarding its efforts to be better and incentivizing more improvements in quality.

All of this has led to the HEIs into privilege student achievement levels and educational efficiency at the expense of including soft or social skills on their curriculums or academic plans. In other words, the quality measurement depends on education products and not on processes or qualitative aspects of the education (Ralph et al. 2017; Tedesco, 2012). This may produce two problems: first, because of achieving and maintaining high indices in these criteria force to the HEIs to establish mechanisms of selection, discrimination issues appear (Meneses and Toro, 2012); second, it intensifies the competition among HEIs, leading them toward individual actions instead of cooperative ones (Santos, Rita and Guerreiro, 2018).

The second school propose qualitative or soft indicators into the quality measurement among HEIs. For instance, Marimon et al. (2019) expose that quality is composed of three dimensions: *curriculum*, *skill development* and *services and facilities*; these should be measured through student’s perception and opinion, because of their personal experience in classrooms and campus life. The authors conducted a research with Catalan students to provide some evidences about their ideas, and conclusions emphasize that students highly appreciate options to enhance soft and hard skills, an adequate way of teaching from their professor and reasonable levels of homework (Marimon et al. 2019).

Given that education is a service, a civil right often understood and treated as a service to be precise, authors like Chandra, Hafni, Chandra y Purwati (2019) defend that students’ satisfactions should be contained within every quality measurement. In matter of fact, the authors expresse that *tangibility, responsiveness, assurance, reliability and empathy* are useful variables to consider if HEIs are attempting to measure quality, especially when is informed by students who receive the educational service.

Similarly, Hill, Lomas and MacGregor (2003) argue that students’ perception are valuable resources to measure quality among HEIs, in particular around four dimensions: quality of the lecturers, student engagement with learning, social/emotional support systems and resources of library. Students appreciate open communication, enthusiasm and feedback from their lecturers, particularly when they feel overwhelmed or disoriented. These aspects of university life are not always included in the measurements; thus, quality is mainly evaluated from structural and market conditions.

Trying of reconcile the two schools, Muchemwa (2017) establishes two dimensions to measure quality among HEIs: internal and external factors. The first is associated with teaching, learning and assessment activities, and the second with accreditation, market influences and government policies. Later of analyzing a university in Zimbabwe, the author states that quality must be concerned for students’ satisfaction, but at the same time, must include the university's ability to respond to the needs of the community where is located.

All of these features form part of the complex framework that characterizes the quality measurement nowadays. Of course, some territories or countries have specific criteria, variables and indicators to measure quality in HEIs. In Chile, researchers often use a hybrid lens to do this, composed of market, performance, accreditation and prestige criteria. However, some recent authors have started suggesting that adjustments are needed. In particular, Chilean UES should include the student perception, his/her background and school performance on their quality standards. This is a gap that can be reduced incorporating some student-related variables (Meneses and Toro, 2012; Larroucau, Ríos y Mizala, 2015). For this reason, the following paragraphs present a brief contextualization of the quality measurement amongst HEIs in Chile and why some changes are needed.

*Quality measurement in Chilean HEIs: what is it the aim of the service?*

In Chile there many HEIs, which can be divided between private and public institutions. In addition to this administrative taxonomy, institutions can be classified according to degrees that students get once they graduate from courses, and also for the complexity of their services; in ascendant order, higher education is composed of: technical institutes, colleges and Ues. The focus of this study will be on the last kind of HEIs, especially those that belong to the Council of Rectors of the Universities of Chile (CRUCH). This organization gathers all the public Ues and some privates subscribe, and it is important because there Ues can work together and cooperate in common plans (CRUCH, 2012).

The Ues that belong to the CRUCH are supervised and audited for the National Accreditation Commission (NAC), a governmental association that evaluate certain institutional/academic aspects of the HEIs and decide if they can receive accreditation or not. This is, the NAC is in charge of inspect Ues and determine if they accomplish basic standards to maintain their service or expand it toward specific careers and grades (like medicine or architecture) or, conversely, if they must improve in order to keep their status and certifications (Adán et al. 2016).

The gap this study tries to contribute is precisely here. Both organizations, the NAC and the CRUCH, have understood and measured quality from market, performance, accreditation and prestige aspects of the Ues (Gil, Frites y Muñoz, 2014; Larroucau, Ríos y Mizala, 2015; Rodríguez y Padilla, 2016). The problem is, as several recent researchers mention, that this approach and methodology usually omit substantial information related with students, their satisfaction, evaluation and perception of the service received (Koljatic y Silva, 2012; Medina, Aguirre y Luengo, 2014). This is relevant because students are not merely consumers or costumers, they are citizens and need to be formed and prepared to face important challenges in their lives.

Sometimes, Ues just work and think about how to improve their objective standards of quality, forgetting that their students might hold certain objections or dissatisfactions with the education received that can affect or limit some academic/institutional results. For example, Ues could apply training plans for their professors or supporting courses to the students if negative results in tests are repeated over time; perhaps the problem is not about knowledge or preparation but stimulation and confidence amongst students.

Chilean UES should consider this sort of indicators as part of the quality service they provide to the students. This is the basis of this study, to afford some evidences about the benefits that aspects related to students’ perception, satisfaction and evaluation would have on quality measurement, especially that one made by organizations like CRUCH and NAC. The sample is composed of first and fourth-year students from five Chilean public universities, which represent different types of institutions. Data will be collected through e-mail questionnaires and focus groups will be conducted with some students to better understand their opinions, expectations and satisfaction with the education they receive.00

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