

QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION SERIES  
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Marília Costa Morosini  
Organizadora

QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION:  
REFLECTIONS AND INVESTIGATIVE PRACTICES

QUALIDADE DA EDUCAÇÃO SUPERIOR:  
**REFLEXÕES E PRÁTICAS  
INVESTIGATIVAS**



volume

3



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Fone/fax: (51) 3320 3711

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# QUALITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION: TENDENCIES AND UNCERTAINTIES

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Marilia Costa Morosini

## INTRODUCTION

As the title of this article suggests, the topic of quality in higher education continues to be a major highlight on the national and international scene, but now reflects the uncertainties regarding the certainty of a concept of unchallenged isomorphic higher education quality.

To account for this topic, we start with the principle that Quality is a construct that overlaps with societies and consequently with the paradigms for understanding them and the role of higher education in the construction of a better and sustainable world.

With the objective of not only touching upon that which is being produced internationally, but enabling its dissemination in our country and discussing international production from a local perspective, I have been producing states of knowledge on higher education. It is in this context that from the beginning of the century, I have been focused on studying the quality of higher education, whether through courses administered in the graduate program in education, advising dissertations and internships, coordinating the CAPES/INEP observatory of education and publishing papers. This is the case of the articles below:

MOROSINI, M. C. *The quality of higher education: isomorphism, diversity and equity*, Interface \_ Comunicação, Saúde, Educação, UNESP, v.5, n.9, p.89-102, 2001.

MOROSINI, M. C. *Qualidade na Educação Superior: tendências do século*. Revista de Avaliação Educacional. São Paulo/FCC, v.20, n.43, p. 165-186, 2010.

In the first article, entitled *The quality of higher education: isomorphism, diversity and equity*, I begin with the principle that the international tendencies brought by the Knowledge Society, stimulated by internationalization and by the development of new communication technologies, have been markedly disseminating among us, a country historically characterized by State control over higher education, the era of quality. The article examines different conceptions and strategies of university quality, coming from international experiences. Among the main concepts that stand out is that of quality, a synonym for

isomorphism, reflecting standardized evaluation and aimed at employability; quality, a synonym with respect to specificities; and quality, a synonym for equity. By the scarceness of the bibliography regarding the holistic view on the topic, this article, more than introduce proposals, raises questions regarding the relation between educational quality and innovation and the uniqueness of the concept of quality and Brazilian reality.

In the second article, entitled *Quality in higher education: tendencies of the century*, I constructed a state of knowledge on quality in higher education, based on the international perspectives that influence the national ones through the globalization process, and I identified conceptions of the qualities of isomorphism, specificity and equity and analyzed the trajectory of the concept of university quality and its propositional organizations in this century. UNESCO's position is worth highlighting, as well as its ramifications, such as IESALC and GUNI, in constructing the concept of higher education quality for sustainable development. The minimization of the differences between the three types of quality was observed, despite the predominance of the isomorphic type. The tendency to use evaluation indexes and impact measures of university quality was noted, as well as the tendency of research on students and, more recently, on the alumnus – *learning outcomes*. The conception of quality is not clear and is related to whom it is aimed at and by whom it is defined.

After 2007, when these second and third articles began to be written, some important events, regarding higher education quality, took place. Among them were the WCHE/UNESCO 2009 – World Conference of Higher Education/UNESCO, 2009, and the OECD event and publications, which highlight the importance of the concept of Quality Assurance in higher education.

It is in this context that the present article resumes that which was found and analyzed in the previous three articles and analyzes the path covered regarding the concept of university quality and its propositional sources.

## **1. HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY: ISOMORPHIC, SPECIFICITY AND EQUITY**

Regarding studies about the ideal Weberian type of quality, three possibilities were found: isomorphic quality, the quality of diversity and the quality of equity.

Isomorphic Quality can be summarized as a unique model of quality. There are studies whose discussions range from financial principles to those that discuss the central concept of quality; from the types that simply evaluate



quality to those that have as an objective the accreditation of institutions and/or programs and which at the core reveal auditing; from those that are aimed at the evaluation of study programs to those related to institutional evaluation.

One of the main centers of this conception of quality is the United Kingdom, with respect to objectives of measuring higher education quality for the employability of their graduates, as well as objectives of building a theoretical framework. In the former case, university quality as employability is considered multidimensional and complex which imposes difficulties for evaluation. However, in sum, it is measured by personal qualities (E), key skills (S) and skill development (U) and metacognition.

Harvey (2000) proposes five types of quality analyzed according to a variety of existing standards, namely: academic standards, competence standards, organizational standards and service standards.

The multidimensional Matrix of quality is focused on five key aspects:

- *Exception*, in which quality is defined in terms of excellence, possessing a minimum group of standards;
- *Perfection*, in which quality is concentrated on the process and aims for zero-flaws;
- *Conditions for a purpose*, in which quality is related to a purpose defined by a provider;
- *Value for money*, in which quality is concentrated on efficiency and effectiveness by measuring production with respect to *inputs*; and
- *Transformation*, in which quality conveys the notion of qualitative change which improves and empowers the student.

The **quality of specificity** can be summarized as the presence of standardized Indicators parallel to the preservation of that which is different. This conception reflects much of the reality in the European Union, for the need to preserve the member-states, respecting their differences and including countries for their differences. Thus, the idea that there is no single standard of higher education quality is accepted, and the foundation is a principle of quality that is better adapted to that country.

In this perspective, the following strategies are recommended: no fiscal control and auditing of every higher education institution, in other words, the autonomy of government agencies or bodies to carry out recommendations on Higher Education Quality; as well as the establishment of guidance providing networks on higher education quality.

The **quality of equity** is centered on the conception of differentiated treatment for those who are differentiated. It reflects conceptions present in regions with broad differences in social strata, as is the case of Brazil and Latin America. In studies by UNESCO, the following are considered key factors: Length of education, treatment of diversity, academic autonomy, curriculum/curricular autonomy, participation of the educational community and management of academic centers, academic administration, faculty, educational evaluation and innovation and investigation.

## 2. QUALITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In the third article that covered a post-2005 view, scientific production on Higher Education is developed as a commitment to human and social development. In terms of an ideal Weberian type, the clear separation between the types of isomorphic quality, quality of specificity and quality equity is no longer identified. There is a tendency for the conception of isomorphic Quality to remain, though with a weaker intensity, parallel to the tendency to combine the quality of specificity with the quality of equity.

UNESCO stands out in this consolidation and establishes as an objective for 2005 – 2014, *Education for Sustainable Development*, promoting and improving Basic Education and development, including Higher Education.

The branch of UNESCO for Latin America and the Caribbean – IESALC, develops the social commitment of universities in LA and the Caribbean with the application of institutional policies that adopt the *education as a public good* principle in compliance with the values of quality, pertinence, insertion and equity. (UFMG, Oct. 2007).

GUNI – Global University Network of Innovation, a branch of UNESCO, located in Barcelona, aims to disseminate the concept of University Social Responsibility (La Jará, 2007), by which the institution highlights the importance of: management, teaching, research and extension and as an institution that distributes and implements principles and values; and in the *university plan*, a commitment to the truth; excellence; interdependence and transdisciplinarity. The impact of the university on sustainable responsibility is highlighted (Zaffaroni, 2007), namely: Organizational, Environmental, Educational, Cognitive and Social Impact.

The following are noteworthy regarding educational impact: students graduate as democratic citizens; the university community has the opportunity to actively participate in community service projects; they participate in the

reflection of accomplished experiences; the educational community voluntarily commits to service projects; interdisciplinary work in community service projects; continuous improvements in the curricula based on accomplished experiences, etc. (UNESCO PRESSE, 2001).

### 3. QUALITY ASSURANCE – FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL

Until the middle of the first decade of this century, the higher education quality movement was limited to the concept of quality and its strategies. The ideal types of higher education quality were aimed at local analyses. Now, it is accompanied by a consolidation of the university internationalization process, strengthening the notion of **Quality Assurance**.

The main influencers of this fortification are the multilateral organizations: **OECD** and **UNESCO**. This occurs basically through events and publications and CMES/UNESCO, 2009.

#### 3.1. OECD – Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

The OECD gathers governments from the countries committed to democracy and the economy of the market around the world, with some of its objectives being: to support sustainable economic growth, to aid in the economic development of other countries, to contribute to the growth of world commerce. OECD brings together the most developed countries in the world.

The OECD published **Assuring and improving quality**, Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society – OECD (2008, p. 7-63). In the publication, *Assuring and Improving Quality*, the importance of education in contemporary society is affirmed:

With the move towards knowledge-driven economies and societies, **education** has never been more important for the future economic performance and relative economic standing of countries, but also to allow individuals to perform and fully participate in the economy and society. (OECD, 2007. p. )

With the Knowledge Society and Knowledge Economy, “*quality assurance* has become a necessity for policy makers to demonstrate that public funds are spent effectively and that the public purposes for financing tertiary education are actually fulfilled” (Aldeman and Brown, 2007).

With the internationalization of higher education, this stamp of quality assurance takes on a greater value, since it is fundamental for increasing student mobility, the reputation of the higher education institution among countries, quality monitoring, the Globalization of careers and the need for common standards. Quality assurance is reinforced since “Irrespective of the drivers and rationales of convergence, the trend towards similar systems of tertiary education yields common concerns across countries regarding the performance of their TEIs” (Woodhouse, 1999).

In this context, quality assurance can be defined as the process of establishing investor trust, whose provision (*input*, process and results) fulfills expectations and is shown to be in line with the minimum threshold requirements.

The OECD points out the need for key agencies to certify quality assurance and to assume the global responsibility of quality assurance. These agencies can be the responsibility of educational authorities, governmental groups and autonomous agencies.

The OECD also highlights the role of the civil society in the quality assurance of higher education and the growing importance of *rankings* in the media.

In the wake of quality assurance guidelines, the OECD held, in September of 2008, the International Seminar **Outcomes of higher education: Quality relevance and impact**. In this event, quality assurance strategies were discussed, preferentially, from the perspective of Europeanization.

The rankings were examined in depth and it was declared that their use is the result of a pursuit of comparability between HEIs, basically through the internationalization process.

Various characteristics and different rankings were pointed out, and have already been analyzed in other papers, namely (MOROSINI, 2010):

- *The Carnegie Classification of institutions* – USA: Ranking organized by study level and specialization;
- *Shanghai Jiao Tong University - World's Best Universities*: The most potent research bases and highest intellectual values for scientist mobility;
- *Times Higher Education Supplement - THES (2004)*: Impact preferentially on students aimed at internationalization;
- *The Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan - (HEEACT, 2008)*: Ranking of the 500 best universities by their performance in research;
- *The Webometrics (2009) – The World Ranking Web of Universities*: Evaluates the largest number of HEIs worldwide;

Journal rankings - *Thomson-ISI and Elsevier-Scopus* (2007).

Though the OECD defends and disseminates the use of rankings mainly at the core of the internationalization process, some authors such as Marginsons (2008, p. 24) call attention to “Where particular sectors have a primarily local mission, are not involved in global research circuits or teaching markets, and bear no close resemblance to the sectors of other nations, nothing can be gained by applying global data comparisons that could not be more accurately secured by national performance management”.

In this same line of thinking, West (2009, p. 9) reaffirms: “If universities are indeed to be locally engaged as well as globally competitive, they have to develop their own unique missions rather than giving priority to whatever will maximize the current league table position. Agreement on a new system of rankings will not be easy to achieve, but it is essential if the present Faustian bargain is to be replaced by an arrangement where reputation is not purchased at an unacceptable price in terms of the surrender of institutional autonomy”.

### **3.2. UNESCO – United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization**

UNESCO’s mission is to contribute to the consolidation of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, science, culture, communication and information. UNESCO is one of the multilateral organizations that have a major impact on higher education. Its main headquarters is in Paris and has branches on all continents. In Latin America, the head office is in the city of Caracas and is called IESALC/UNESCO.

It is worth noting that there is no transnational organization that makes decisions for all nations: the sovereignty of the national state is present. This way, though the recommendations of UNESCO are not normative obligations for all nations, it is customary for them to be adopted by the countries.

In WCHE/UNESCO 2009, which brought more than 1000 representatives from all over the world to Paris and was preceded by regional meetings on the five continents, the importance of quality assurance was asserted.

Uvalic-Trumbic, secretary general of WCHE, highlighted in his talk on *Internationalizing Quality Assurance: a New Dynamic for Higher Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*” (PUCRS, 2010), the new dynamic in higher education with quality assurance from local to global.

From this global perspective, transnational education is defined by UNESCO/Council of Europe as:

All types of higher education study programs, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such programs may belong to the education system of a State different from the State in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national education system.

Parallel to the advancement of the implementation of global quality assurance, a strong discussion takes place regarding higher education as an educational service. This argument has as one of its forums the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in the World Trade Organization (WTO). The GATS distinguishes 4 modes in international education service providing, which are useful for understanding commercial transnational education:

- Mode 1: Transborder education service providing (distance education, virtual education institutions, educational software and business education through ICTs).
- Mode 2: Consuming educational services abroad (students studying abroad)
- Mode 3: Commercial presence (local university, or satellite campus, language education businesses, private education businesses).
- Mode 4: The presence of people (full professors, professors, researchers who work abroad).

UNESCO highlights that currently, challenges are perceived as particularly important in the developing countries where the social demand for higher education is higher and expects an increase in the coming years. The educational systems are still fragile and suffer from a scarceness of qualified professors, with the brain drain and insufficient funding. The public administrations' ability to coordinate and manage the respective higher education systems is also very weak, and the information systems are frequently underdeveloped, at the institutional level as well as the system level. Apart from the problem of controlling and assuring the quality of commercial transnational higher education, there are possible negative effects on equity – academic fees can be prohibitive, and access to transnational education can be limited to privileged social classes. Finally, the state can be tempted to continue to reduce the costs relative to higher education, assuming that the market can bear a growing part of it (MARTIN, 2007, p. 15).

The UNESCO member countries' acceptance of the establishment of quality assurance was facilitated by the WCHE preparatory conferences which

dealt with quality assurance at the sub-regional and regional levels through national agency networks. It was also facilitated by the existence of regional harmonization processes (Bologna) and the existence of the European Higher Education Area providing an international opportunity and was moreover facilitated by the emergence of ENLACES, by the African Union, the PAN-REGIONAL Asia-Pacific Community initiative, among others.

The final 2009 WCHE Bulletin fragments quality assurance. Despite this fragmentation, the crucial value of quality assurance is reflected in the 52 Bulletin articles in various references: Expanding access and quality is the greatest challenge; regulatory mechanisms and quality assurance are intended for every HE sector with the challenge of diversification.

It has been pointed out that recognizing quality assurance attracts and retains qualified professors, that quality assurance is the first factor of defense against frauds and false diplomas and that quality assurance, at the regional level, is an important step in acquiring effective results.

UNESCO, together with OECD, produces quality assurance instruments. One of the most important instruments, based on the conception of the quality of diversity, is the establishment of a quality assurance system in each one of the 47 European Union member states.

It is also worth noting the different existing tools, such as:

- Guidelines and Standards for quality assurance;
- European Quality Assurance Register;
- Guidelines for providing quality in transborder education – (UNESCO, 2006).
- Conventions for recognizing diplomas – WCHE

The UNESCO initiative also deserves mention, which since 2002, has held global forums on quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications.

UNESCO – World Bank through GIQAC – Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity, supports regional networks for quality assurance agencies. Networks are identified in the following regions: Africa, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, the Caribbean, Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The web portal (UNESCO Portal) is also cited as a quality assurance instrument supported by governments which provide an evaluation for their country's institutions.

In this context of the second decade of the new century, it is worth remembering that the construction of a knowledge state has dated and territorially situated references. The present article deals with the topic of

higher education quality at the end of the last century and the beginning of the present one, using international scientific publications with strong American and European influences as sources. The results point towards the indication that the topic of quality in higher education has been growing significantly in terms of the number of publications. They also point out that the conception of quality, during the entire period studied, undergoes pressure and directing by multilateral organizations, with OECD and UNESCO standing out.

They also point out that the internationalization of quality assurance is a reality.

However, the developing countries, while adapting to this reality, will have to elaborate their own new, feasible and less troublesome solutions, focused mainly on the establishment of a quality culture in higher education institutions. Some of these approaches can very well provide models for more developed countries as they face new political challenges... (UVALIC-TRUMBIC. 2010, p.11).

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