

The Self-Assessment Processes in reaccredited Education Careers: Trends for curricular change

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Introduction

Frequently, the accreditation of careers and programs has been seen as an external imposition that exerts its power, directly or indirectly, over higher education institutions and makes them liable for the results arising from these processes.

This paper analyzes the possibilities of transforming the discipline itself, from "inside", through the systematization of self-assessment speeches in accredited careers, from their curricular practice, their social contexts and academic projects. Moreover, this paper shows other categories that were blurred, perhaps, with the passage from self-assessment to accreditation. They constitute a series of features that acquire significance and that can lead to new discursive practices⁴.

An accreditation agency in a Central American country

The economic crisis of the seventies caused modifications in the model of social change for the Latin American region. This model has transited from developmentalist, neoliberalism, the globalization of the eighties and nineties, until now.

The interference of financing entities in Latin America on the education⁵ sector regarding the issues of modernization is known. The model reinforced by financial and technical policies⁶, gained notoriety in the definition of the social agenda of countries, by advocating on its privatization, under the "significances" of "quality", "efficiency", "equity", among others (Badilla, 2009. Jiménez, 2011). Higher education is no exception to this tendency.

Since the late 80s to 2000, Costa Rica experienced a significant increase in the supply of higher private education, rising from only one university in 1985 to 47 in 2000 (Ruiz, 2001). In Costa Rica, the accreditation processes emerged as an initiative within the public universities⁷. It should be recalled that the regulation of higher education goes back to the Greek illustration. The sophists examined, in light of human reason, political and social institutions. They also introduced the notion of "curriculum" in the different disciplines (Abbagnano and Visalberghi, 1990. Brock, 2006).



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To assess the quality of higher education, different accreditation agencies arose, to which courses or programs could refer to⁸. There is a trend towards what has become known as quality culture⁹, especially in careers or programs considered a priority for the integral development of societies and curriculum. A culture, not always well understood, since the notion of quality is approached as an intellectual construction, through communication processes between subjectivities that come to objectify by agreements of the same subjects or academic communities, as in this case. This dynamic is under review, because there will always be an outside entity that prevents its final closure. Unless it materializes in a discursive chain, it becomes a floating signifier (Badilla, 2016).

In general, in the academic field, "social risk" careers have been identified in areas such as health, applied sciences, law and education. The Ministry of Education of Costa Rica proposed an amendment of the Law to the Consejo Nacional de Educación Superior Privada (CONESUP) which pretends that "careers related to Education, Health and civil engineering must obtain its official certificate of accreditation through SINAES – or from an agency recognized by it¹⁰." This meaning that the acreditación will be mandatory.

The evaluation model for accreditation applied by SINAES

The evaluation model of SINAES has been applied since 1993. This model is based on the CIPP model (Context, Input, Process and Product). The application allows identifying some conditions given by institutional bodies within the university, however, it leaves aside a deeper analysis on academic issues and that related to the implementation of the curriculum¹¹.

The current assessment model of SINAES is rigid and uses indicators that are not particularly accurate. The application of this model has resulted in broad narrative reports with a lack of assessment criterion. For these reasons, the model is under review.

The new model is designed on the basis of an agreed notion of a quality career in higher education in Costa Rica: structural characteristics and the conditions of implementation and integral evaluation of its processes (de Alba, 1991). The model focuses on the contributions given by students, academic staff, the curriculum, universal referents of the disciplines and society.

In its design, the proposal involves the participation of curricular experts, different participants such as authorities from different careers, self-evaluation commissions, evaluation experts, technical staff of SINAES and the National Accreditation Council, the highest level of hierarchy.

The reasons set out above, among others, motivate the authors of this lecture to analyze the self-assessment speeches of the re accredited careers in the field of education, in the period from 2001 to 2015. The use of systematization of speeches that seem homogeneous allow to discover and rebuild the experience lived (Barnechea et.al2009. Jara, 1994. Venegas, 2009) from the field of curriculum evaluation rather than accreditation¹².

The systematization consisted of an initial phase of review and analysis of twenty-eight self-assessment reports of careers in the field of education that wanted to be accredited or re accredited. Subsequently, in a second phase, trends or senses emerged that allowed the interpretation and criticism of self-assessment speeches. In a third phase, a set of components that have a specific relevance or "significance" were determined for those particular careers¹³.



This paper analyzes different aspects of curricular nature that converge in self-assessment. Moreover, it points out some achievements, problems, and empty spaces that took place in these careers and identify some trends toward curricular change.

What did we find in this analysis?¹⁴

1. The emphasis refers to those elements that highlight, for example, the recurring concern for educational research: the unsatisfied desire of researching and developing policies and regulations to reinforce initiatives in this area. Careers require more and more research projects, although, they are always insufficient and contribute little to the improvement of careers or to transformative curricular proposals.

Another discursive emphasis are the students, who have become participatory, in regular meetings dealing with topics of interest. They know about changes in their curriculum and participate in curriculum commissions. The procedures create a closer relationship with students proving this technique to be more effective.

Careers have improved communication processes with students, using mainly Tics, for example, emails in virtual platforms. Students advocate for improvements in the network service and access to technological resources. Students express an appropriate degree of satisfaction in aspects such as information received, care, and career management, which guarantee respect of their rights.

2. Absent are those relevant aspects that are identified in the speech, but are ignored in practice, as in the case of curriculum flexibility, educational tours, and the systematic dissemination of research results.

According to the students, information on labor markets as well as monitoring the graduates' working conditions, are necessary actions for strengthening the curriculum and exploring other developmental options.

3. Achievements or scopes of self-evaluation processes are aimed at motivating teachers to propose research and social action projects to enhance non-formal education and strengthen the curriculum. In one way or another, didactic strategies are reinforced and teachers show permanent care and best practices in teaching and in the discipline area. Changes in curriculum are reported promptly. The evaluation for learning emerges as a further achievement, overcoming the notion of measurement and incorporating other moments of evaluation such as diagnostic and formative assessment, as well as the importance of evaluation for the improvement of teaching-learning processes.

4. The concerns are linked to persistent issues related to the duration of students to graduate and stay in their career. For students as for teachers, the multimedia equipment is insufficient, although it presents optimal conditions for use. Some courses have little relation to the educational reality, and not all teachers have a stable employment.

5. Trends in curriculum changes are clearly identified because over time it has been observed, for example, the obvious improvements in the curriculum through the design and redesign of subjects. Careers have made participatory processes led by curriculum committees that involves teachers, students, employers, and graduates for upgrades and redesigns the curriculum, which has favored its overall improvement. They have implemented flexible mechanisms such as fluid sequence of courses and few co-requisites, electives; counseling is offered to organize registration.



Graduation modalities have varied. The seminars are strengthened as an option for final requirement before graduation, because they provide the possibility to cover emerging issues of reality, and/or incorporate contributions from other disciplines in the training of the students.

The interaction of students from different careers to find solutions to practical problems of educational reality is promoted. Moreover, the distribution of research content from both the quantity and quality perspective has improved.

In the particular case of distance education, the advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT) has favored the development of applications for pedagogical mediation and collaboration platforms that integrate into the infrastructure of virtualization, with redundancy¹⁵ schemes. Services are available for those in the peripheral areas.

In a few cases, requisites of an entry profile and graduation profile are defined which makes it difficult to orient the curricular design. The same happens with the redundancy of the curricular objectives. The language used is very diverse which makes it difficult to understanding a better curricular design.

Teachers, students and graduates show a positive perception regarding the logical sequence of courses and the integration of theory and practice. This is evident in their projects, fieldwork, and classwork to solve problems, among others.

Ethics has been incorporated into the various curriculum in a transversal form. However, the "ownership" of this theme by students and graduates is still a significant challenge.

Significant progress was noted in the diversity of teaching methods. Careers have strengthened actions that bring students to the analysis and study of problems related to context. There have been some few trials on curricula based on competence approach studies.

Finally, we would like to answer some questions:

Does self-assessment allow reflective processes to improve curricular practices?

Yes, careers allow understanding and improving of educational performance through self-assessment as a systematic process of self-reflection, confrontational and critical processes, hidden and visible powers. It should be noted that self-assessment develops autonomy and social responsibility in higher education institutions as well as the improvement of learning practices.

Does self- assessment help different groups to recognize their own curriculum, their articulations and implement changes?

We could say, yes. It helps to systematize advances and recognize opportunities, desires and possibilities for transformation. Resistances are also determined. There are points of agreement and commitments of improvement for change.

Does self-assessment challenge the accrediting organization?

Yes, it allows identifying weaknesses in: the evaluation model, the established procedures and in the work of external peers. Specially, it reveals elements of inequity between the subject being evaluated and the evaluators. The accreditation agency learns to recognize the diverse contexts in which the careers are developed.



Does the pedagogy as a disciplinary field become strengthened?

We consider that its absence is of significant importance. Teaching skills remain weak in the learning processes as well as the analysis and criticism of the curricular experience itself.

Notes

¹ Member of the National Accreditation Council Consejo Nacional de Acreditación (CNA).

² Reseacher, SINAES

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⁴ According to De Alba, 1995

⁵ Also in the health sector

⁶ World Bank, Organization for the Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

⁷ In 1999, the agreement between the Rectors of four public universities and four private, for the creation of the National Accreditation System of Higher Education (SINAES, in its English acronym) was ratified.

⁸ “Career” refers to the degree and postgraduate program.

⁹ A culture that is not always well understood, since the notion of quality is approached as an intellectual construction, through communication processes between subjectivities that become objective structures by agreements of the same subjects or academic communities. It is under review, it is dynamic, because there will always be an external entity that prevents its final closure. Unless it materializes in a discursive chain, it becomes a floating signifier (Badilla , 2016).

¹⁰ During the 5 years after the commencement of this Law (Transitorio, IV). Project for the Amendment to the law of creation of the CONESUP (2016, p.31). That is, that the acreditación will be mandatory.

¹¹ This analysis emphasizes curriculum as a practice more than as a formal curriculum (Díaz, A. 2015)

¹² To trascend indicators of the model.

¹³ With importance and theoretical and methodological potential. (De Alba, 1995)

¹⁴ Twenty-eight self-assessment reports for accreditation and reaccreditation were reviewed. These reports are confidential because they are part of accreditation processes.

¹⁵ Redundancy should be understood as the capacity to ensure virtual spaces 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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