

# Quality and quality assurance in higher education

María José Lemaitre  
Executive Director  
CINDA



Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo

# Main trends in Latin American higher education

- Significant growth of enrolment, focused mainly on traditionally excluded sectors (lower income, less cultural resources, adults; different needs, different interests)
- Diversification of higher education: types of HEI, programs, teaching modes, student population. Hardly recognized in policy making or QA processes
- Privatization, or rapid growth of the private sector
- Strong influence of market driven approaches
- Strong tradition of autonomy of HEI, with little or no control by governments. Most countries do not have any public agency able to define mid or long term policies or priorities for higher education.



# Quality Assurance in LA

Established in the early 1990's, promoted by governmental actions, with a wide range of mechanisms:

- Public agencies with few exceptions
- Engaged in institutional accreditation, program accreditation or both
- Some cases of assessment of student learning (Brazil, Colombia)
- Mostly voluntary, with some cases of compulsory accreditation (programs in Argentina, medicine and teacher training in Chile, education in Peru)



# **QUALITY ASSURANCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**



# Quality Assurance in LA

A study done in the five countries with consolidated QA systems showed a strong perception that QA has had a positive impact on HE:

- Has made clear social and public expectations about quality
- Has contributed to the improvement of information systems both at the national and institutional levels, and to their use in decision making
- At the level of T&L, it has improved the definition of expected learning outcomes, curriculum design and development, teaching strategies, the availability of teaching and learning resources

BUT,

- it looks mostly at formal aspects, rather than to substantive issues
- It places a heavy bureaucratic burden on HEI
- It does not take diversity into account

# CHALLENGES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE



## Currently, QA is a victim of its own success:

- accepted by HEI, and recognized as effective
- This makes it difficult to change or redesign QA processes.

At the same time, QA has developed into a routine.  
Everyone has learnt to play the game, need not to do  
more of the same.



## Need to focus increasingly on internal QA:

- Link between QA and planning
- Institutional research capacities to support quality management
- Promotion of institutional capacity for self regulation

BUT:

## Governments increasingly focus on QA as a major regulatory tool

- Emphasis on quantitative, standardized quality criteria
- Little consideration of diversity
- Accreditation used as a pre-condition for access to funding, student loans, work opportunities, other



- Accreditation has become essential for HEI
  - The higher the stakes, the higher the risk for compliance
- QA agencies are concerned about the impact on HEI and on students of refusing accreditation
  - Accreditation becomes less rigorous



- Higher education is one of the main policy concerns in all LA countries (albeit without effective policy instruments)
- Quality and equity are essential priorities for governments
- Preservation of autonomy is a major concern for HEI (while governments press for a re-definition of 'responsible autonomy')
- QA is seen as a central actor because of its regulatory potential; but it is being pulled in different directions by governments, HEIs, professional associations, student organizations



## Some new approaches:

- Different set of criteria for different types of HEI
- Special training for external reviewers, specially linked to types of HEI, programs, other
- Diversification of accreditation decisions:
  - Yes / no
  - Recognition of different areas / functions
  - Period of validity of accreditation decisions, depending on the degree of consolidation of HEI
- How to deal with innovation and change

