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## **QUALITY ASSURANCE: FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE**

**Independence in accreditation: a stakeholder analysis of higher education.**

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## Critical issues

- How to manage the tension between the need to work with higher education institutions in order to make QA more relevant, and the risk of their interference in the operation of QA processes?
- What are the main issues regarding the independence of quality assurance processes, and how to deal with the need for them to be responsive to social and institutional requirements?

# An approach to accreditation

## Accreditation defined

- is a socially **regulated** process
- leading to an evaluative **certification**
- of the **quality** of an academic **outcome**
- oriented towards **continuing improvement**

# An approach to accreditation

## Accreditation as an asset

- Value added which is a consequence of the evaluative certification is an institutional asset
- The institutional asset produced by accreditation can be considered as a “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu)
- As capital, this “symbolic asset” is accumulated, generates “profit” and is traded in a “market”, which is a socially regulated space of transactions.

# An approach to accreditation

## The domain of Higher Education

- The domain of higher education can be treated as a space for decisions and transactions involving a plurality of interests (generic, corporate, collective, individual interests).
- A wide variety of actors concur to this space (public agents, institutions, organizations, institutional authorities, corporate groups, academic networks, families, persons)
- A multiple, diversified set of interested actors, constitute a complex array of “stakeholders.”

# Stakeholder Analysis

- In the literature, a **stakeholder** is a group which affects or can be affected by the actions of a corporation (R. Edward Freeman 1984, *Strategic Management: A stakeholder approach*. Boston: Pitman).
- Differing from the traditional analysis of organizations, the theory of stakeholder analysis states that in corporations (besides “shareholders”) there are other involved parties such as governmental agencies, political groups, commercial associations, communities, corporate groups, employees, clients (actual and eventual), and the public at large.

# Stakeholders in Higher Education

Several agents or groups that can affect or be affected by the institutions in the domain of higher education can be identified, according to the following criteria:

- **The organized vs. non organized dimension**
- **The public or private character of the domain**
- **The clustering of interests in transactional foci**

Resting on these criteria, the following agents, actors, and/or groups, can be treated as stakeholders:

**the public sphere**

State agencies  
International agencies  
Professional Associations  
Public Universities  
State Universities  
Accrediting agencies  
Academic authorities

Political actors  
Student movements  
Academic communities  
Mass media

**organiza  
tions**

**categories**

Church/religious organizations  
Foundations  
Scientific Societies  
Private Universities  
Academic authorities  
Consulting Agencies  
NGO's

Students  
Employers  
Firms  
Families

**the private sphere**

# Transactional Foci

We can assume that each stakeholder is able to organize its interests in a particular focus which is a convergence space for recognizing the priorities that can move the stakeholder to action, with variable intensity and persistence in time. We can also assume that the focused interests are, under certain “political” conditions, matters for transaction.

With that idea in mind, we can attempt a more detailed look at each of the different stakeholders that are positioned in the four quadrants of the preceding structural arrangement.

# Stakeholders: organizations in the public sphere

## Stakeholders

- ***State agencies***
- ***International agencies***
- ***State Universities***
- ***Professional associations***

## Transactional Foci

public resources (accountability)-  
legitimacy- credibility of the guarantee of  
public trust- systemic control of  
subsidies for students (e.g.  
scholarships)

rankings of institutions-  
interinstitutional cooperation-selective  
funding

recognition- positioning vis a vis private  
institutions -competitiveness- attraction  
of deserving students - public funding-  
"national"mission

enhancement of corporate groups-  
technical contributions- quality  
certification of study programs

# Stakeholders: organizations in the public sphere

## Stakeholders

- *Accrediting agencies*
- *“Public” Universities*
- *Academic authorities*

## Transactional Foci

technical competence- consensus building on quality- dialogues with academic communities-defense of clients (students)- effects of certifications

specific contents of quality criteria- validity of institutional missions – acquisition of prestige

public resources-corporate identity  
rationalization of academic management - plans and policies- internal uses of accreditation

# Stakeholders: organizations in the private sphere

## Stakeholders

- ***Church/religious organizations***
- ***Private Universities***
- ***Autoridades académicas***

## Transactional Foci

institutional missions, value orientations  
autonomy, freedom of teaching

contents of quality criteria responsive to  
institutional projects- enhancement of  
prestige –transnational projection-  
attraction of “good” students-  
competitiveness-acces to public  
resources-publicity of information-rankings

internal impact on institutional  
management- promotion of own  
“educational models”-patterns for  
improvement actions

# Stakeholders: organizations in the private sphere

## Stakeholders

- ***Consulting agencies***
- ***Scientific societies***
- ***Foundations***
- ***NGO's***

## Transactional Foci

academic recognition of technical competence-good informal positioning in the quality assurance system

recognition of members as reliable and competent evaluators-links with accrediting agencies

meaningful resource allocation to programs and/or institutions

social responsibility of institutions, saliency of social implications of knowledge (eg., environment, globalization, gender issues, etc),

# Stakeholders: categories in the public sphere

## Stakeholders

- *Political actors*
- *Academic communities*
- *Student movements*
- *Mass media*

## Transactional Foci

support of local and/or regional interests-involvement to promote national political priorities

contents of quality criteria- prestige of peer evaluators- legitimacy of accrediting agencies

public information- social (and political) consequences of quality criteria

information of and for institutional rankings- international comparisons

# Stakeholders: categories in the private sphere

## Stakeholders

- *Students*
- *Housedholds/families*
- *Employers*
- *Firms*

## Transactional Foci

value of credentials-effects on employment opportunities-public information- selectivity of institutions-monetary returns of titles and grades

cost/quality relation of education-value of credentials-credibility of institutions-trust in participant public agencies

certified specific competences for work requirements, prestige associated to accreditation- credibility of institutions and/or accrediting agencies

recruitment of talent-generic competences for top management-accreditation as an international asset

# Some conclusions.

1. A plurality of stakeholders is a **complex, diversified scenario** , with an entanglement of intertwined demands addressed to institutions, agencies, information systems, study programs, and so.
2. Not all stakeholders are equally active and therefore the need to **handle “passive” stakeholders** is frequently crucial
3. In that context, the systems of quality assurance must take into account the **multiple effects of accreditation** and should work out a balanced articulation of the technical and political dimensions and forces operating in a scenario with a plurality of stakeholders.

## Some conclusions.

4. Independence is a **multidimensional concept** if viewed from the perspective of different stakeholders that are present in the domain of higher education.
5. An important distinction should be made between independence as a condition that is **granted by the statutory arrangement** of the accrediting agencies, and independence as an attribute that is **acquired through the institutional practices** of the agencies vis a vis the plurality of relevant stakeholders.

## Some conclusions

6. **Flexibility of procedures** is important , provided that there is no loss of rigor and impartiality with a view to strengthening the political legitimacy and technical recognition of the agencies that take care of accreditation processes.
7. Higher education institutions should be sensible as regards the **numerous expectations and demands** that are addressed to them, from a wide spectrum of actors, and not only from the accrediting agencies, without forgetting that not all stakeholders' demands or expectations can be equally met. This is a question for a political strategy.

## Some conclusions

**8. Institutional intelligence to handle all relevant stakeholders** must be located somewhere in the national quality assurance system, in order to learn the pertinent lessons from experiences that are nowadays enriched by the cultural and political diversity of such systems at the global level.