

EVALUATION TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION - A GLOBAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVE -

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The University of Costa Rica (UCR) is the oldest institution of higher education in the country, founded in 1940. The three basic academic activities at this institution, (teaching and learning, research and community work) are interlinked tasks that take place in six different areas of knowledge: Arts and Letters, Basic Sciences, Engineering, Agricultural Sciences, Social Sciences and Health Sciences. There are around 25.000 students which represents 43% of the student population attending the four public universities and half the population of students of higher education in the country. It has 12 faculties, 44 schools, five regional campuses and a variety of institutes and centers for research where a diversity of graduate and undergraduate programs are offered, in all areas of knowledge.

The institution that we now have is the product of years of history and has been build up as a joint effort of many people, preoccupied by the need to contribute to the development of the country. In that respect, since its creation in 1940, this institution has provided Costa Rica with the professionals needed by the country on its way to development, and has given a strong research contribution to the Central American region and a diversity of valuable activities of community work.

The University has been changing throughout the years and evaluation has played an important role on those changes and through this document, evaluation is analyzed from the local perspective of the UCR but in the context of a global perspective dealing with actual trends that are changing the academic life of the institutions of higher education.

1. The evaluation past and present.

The UCR is an institution with a long tradition of evaluation and its need to institutionalize the evaluation processes was evident in the establishment of the Center for Academic Evaluation ever since the early years of 1970. By doing so, the UCR established ways to evaluate teachers, academic units, programs and careers, aiming to generate knowledge that would enhance the academic work. Even though, at the beginning, the evaluation was proposed as a way of improvement, it soon prove to be a measure of internal control and a way to examine situations considered as "unhealthy" for the institution. However, the evaluation processes were maintained within the interest of the internal academic life of the UCR until the decade of 1990, when it was resignified in the spirit of quality assurance, accountability, and new ways to give answer to the demands imposed by a different sociopolitical and economical situation, at the national and international level (Vargas, 2001).

As in the rest of the Latin American and many other countries, evaluation started having a new meaning in the decade of 1980, in response to a New World Order. The universities then shifted from internal ways of dealing with those processes to a need to respond to new demands imposed upon the institutions of higher education by external forces, more in tune with the globalization of the economy, new demands for making the institutions of higher education efficient, accountable and product oriented, and to several common trends that we will proceed to clarify.

The idea of evaluation as a way to improve the performance of the university and as a mean to make it accountable was part of a New World Order that emphasized less allocation of public funds into the universities, the idea of market oriented professionals, the encouragement of

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private educational business-like institutions, and the need to make the higher educational institutions more efficient, considering a business oriented rationale. (Yarzabal, 1999; Brunner, 1993; Varela, 1996).

The Latin American countries faced, during the decade of 1980, some common aspects that draw, in general, a unique panorama. There was an increment in higher education population that caused the pressure of a *quantitative growth* at the university level. Along with that, there were *financial constrains* in the countries, do to their difficult economic situation and the need to implement "Financial Adjustment Programs". At the end of the 1980's the Latin American region assigned the lowest public budget to higher education; Africa was investing in education three times more per student, Asia four times more and the United States and Canada fourteen times more. Even in 1990's, Latin America and the Caribbean invested an equivalent amount of 15% of the public funds allocated by Europe or the United States to higher education. Costa Rica, however, was the Latin American country that comparatively invested more funds in higher education. (Yarzabal, 1999).

Both the quantitative growth of higher education population and the financial constrains sustained then the need for establishing evaluation processes as ways to control the allocation of funds and the efficient performance of the institutions of higher education.

There was a third common trend in Latin America that interrelates with the other two previously mentioned, and this was the *privatization of higher education*. In most of the countries there was a proliferation of private institutions of higher education which took place in the framework of a free market economy, but there was also a degree of complacency from governments towards that growth, do to the fact that they also helped to ease the national burden of a growing population in demand of higher education. However, at the same time, it has raised important questions about their quality and lack of rigor. In the case of Costa Rica, the first private university was created in 1975. The second one opened doors in 1985. Eight years later the country had 18 more and in three years, from 1994 to 1997, 26 more institutions were created, adding up to a total of 46 institutions. In the year 2002 it is estimated that the country has about 56 private institutions, of different "degrees" of quality.

One last aspect that influenced the evaluation in higher education was the need for the *internationalization of universities*, which means more than stressing academic links for working together among the institutions. The free commerce treaties emphasize the need for professional mobility which makes it necessary to count with parameters that indicate the similarities of programs and careers.

All these four situations that were just described became important issues in the decade of 1980's and contributed to build up a new panorama in the 1990's for our universities. But also, along with these trends, there was a new way of visualizing the university as an enterprise. A set of ideas borrowed from the business world were incorporated into the "ideal of a university", carrying with them new expectations, meanings and demands for the academic life. Clients, means of production, maximization of funds, earnings, corporative learning, useful careers were some of the terms that helped define the university as an organization. (Shumar, 1997; Ball, 1993).

The "quest for quality" in higher education became, and still is, a big issue serving to justify the need to establish different ways of evaluating the performance of the institutions, in a certain way. This "quest for quality" has become a new language and a *metadiscourse* with different sub-discourses within the idea of a business oriented organization "There are discourses of state control, of consumerism and of academic ownership. There are discourses of judgment and of improvement, of measurement, of client satisfaction and of professional connoisseurship" (Barnett, 1999:74). These discourses also interlink in a way that each discourse may be accompanied by another discourse. In that respect, state control is accompanied by improvement; academic ownership by measurement; client satisfaction by a discourse of

employability. And each one gears towards practices that influence evaluation since, according to idea that drives the quest for quality in higher education, there will be different ways of approaching a given reality in education, emphasizing certain needs and interests which are estimated throughout an evaluation process.

In that respect, the semantic meaning of quality can lead to design a type of evaluation that takes into account only certain aspects and ignores others which may be important for the understanding of sociopolitical and historical situations of the institutions and their countries. Therefore, a careful approach must be set if the definition of quality is established *only* in terms of efficiency, impact, relevance, pertinence, leaving behind important aspects of the university life, very much in tune with the needs of the Third World countries such as *equity, joint efforts, community work, solidarity, justice* for example.

During the decade of 1990, it became clear for at UCR that there was a need to establish new ways of evaluating the professionals, the programs and the careers and, in the decade of 1990, the emphasis grew stronger, around the need to become accredited. Four reasons were then given to sustained that need: To strengthen the quality of the careers and programs, to regulate the private and public systems of higher education, to help with the mobility of professionals in Central America and to attend the demands imposed by the Free Trade Treaties. Evaluation, as a process that would nurture the need for becoming accredited, was incorporated with new dimensions that came from a global perspective which lower the standards of performance and mainly stressed the area of teaching and learning. For that reason, accreditation became a focus of concern, because of the need to enhance some aspects considered as fundamental tasks for this university and that had to deal with the three main areas of the academic life: Teaching and learning, research and community work. Nowadays, new meanings have been incorporated to the evaluation processes that are carried out at the UCR aiming to enhance a more complete academic life.

The scenario that was just described shows a very complex situation for evaluation. From an internal, simple way of analyzing certain aspects of the academic life, in twenty years we have added up an array of circumstances that are reinforcing some elements through different types of evaluation processes, incorporated with certain intentions and meanings. Evaluation is not an innocent process, it can serve as a way to organize higher education systems and make them more in tune with the globalization of the economy and the interest of the transnational world. But also, evaluation can serve the universities as a way to become more transparent, more reflexive on their own activities, more open to healthy international links, more thoughtful about new ways of pursuing the generation, acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. It can help the institutions of higher education to become learning organizations that profit from their own self exam to strengthen the assets and correct the mistakes.

In tune with the importance of evaluation, we need now to clarify some theoretical aspects that sustain its practice.

2. What is Evaluation about?

The same word “evaluation” guides us to the analysis of its meaning. Evaluation has to do with “values” and therefore, in an evaluative process, “someone” chooses something that needs to be valued, some indicators to assess its value, some forms and ways of acquiring and interpreting those indicators, some people to participate in the acts of valuing. Until recently, from a *positivistic paradigm*, evaluation was considered to be an “objective” process aimed at understand a reality that was considered predictable, accountable, subject to quantification, to partialization, generalization and, above all, value free. This approach lead to the use of parameters, indicators, methods, actors considering a distance (in search of “objectivity”) between what was being evaluated and the people involved and guided towards an analysis of situations that was deterministic and which ignored the historical development of situations and the context in which they occurred. (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

New ways of understanding “reality” as something complex, dynamic and diverse (multiple realities) is leading towards the understanding of evaluation as a process where subjectivity is predominant. In that respect, people is put in the center of the evaluation process and the question of *who is in control of the evaluation* and *what form does evaluation take* are becoming key issues that lead us to relate *evaluation* and *power*.

The theory of evaluation is now reconstructed beyond the positivistic approach and is leading to an understanding of a process that is wide, complex and deep. To explain this turning point of evaluation in traditional terms, we are going from a summative, external evaluation to a formative, internal, more reflexive approach. Nowadays, to evaluate means to look back into the way we do things and try to understand the history of the process. It is to describe, understand, comprehend, interpret and reinterpret the own way of doing things. It is also to be aware of the errors, difficulties, actions, values, concerns, knowledge, interests, people’s potential, difficulties.

Evaluation is therefore a reflexive process approached through a critical analysis of a situation, problem or social process, that starts being developed from the values, concerns and initial conceptions of the people involved. As stated by De Alba (1991), evaluation is a reflexive process that looks into the origin and development of a given process or situation as well as into its structural characteristics. It demands a historical consideration (origin, development, foreseeable future) and the understanding of “stable conditions” (norms and regulations) as well as the different ways of dealing with those conditions by different actors. Evaluation is considered a sociopolitical process where the people interact in different forms, individually and in groups, in a web of relations of power. The understanding (comprehension) of what is being evaluated can only take place with the participation of all related people, in an analysis of differences and contradictions, compromises and responsibilities, conflict and possibilities.

Changes can only be made, and institutions can only be learning organizations, if information reaches all people and they recognize the need for changing. By being involved in the analysis and understanding of actual situations and by thinking about future possibilities people can start individual changes that may lead to collective new approaches and improve the quality of a given situation.

Taking into account the web of different kinds of power that may intervene with a given purpose, and the importance of people’s participation in changing organizations, we must then look at the true or deep meaning of a process of evaluation.

3. Two approaches to evaluation

Within the array of different forms of evaluation stated as ways to ensure quality, there has been a dominant trend which could be called the *technicist approach of evaluation*, sustained by a positivistic paradigm and aimed to secure higher levels of control and surveillance by emphasizing on the use of performance indicators which are established usually in tune with the needs of the labor market. Governments have been preoccupied about quality assurance of the universities through a technicist approach of evaluation and, by doing so, there is a tendency to steer the aims of the universities toward the direction of the market’s interests. The academic community, in that case, serves as a valuable source of information to fulfill the established form of evaluation but the possibility of a more reflective, hermeneutic, dialogic evaluation is then constrained. (Barnett, 1999)

Within the technicist approach, the intentions of an evaluation process aim at *quality assurance* but, by getting involved in a more reflexive evaluation, the process could aim at *quality improvement*, and this is important to understand since they are not the same and serve different interests. The first one aims to be judgmental, retrospective and formal, in order to identify a problem and lead to immediate action. Quality improvement, in contrast, seeks to enhance the organization and therefore it is future oriented, relatively informal and seeks formative

purposes. In that respect, quality assurance, in traditional terms, could be understood as a summative, external evaluation while, for quality improvement, there is a need to deal with a formative, internal, more reflective process.

By the same token, *accountability* and *self-learning* are two aspects that shed different lights to the importance of evaluation. The first one is aimed to give an account of the organization's performance to a third party and therefore, the involvement of the actors (in our case, the academia), is mainly as providers of information. A self-learning evaluation considers that learning is, itself, internal and a part of the evaluation since through this process it is possible to learn. With that into account, as stated by Barnett (1999),

“...the evaluation becomes a reflexive process in which the actors critique their own practices, learn about themselves and see themselves in a new way and so open up for themselves new possibilities for action. Such a form of evaluation would take the form of an ideal speech situation... in which the dialogue is open and undistorted by power relationships.” (p.76).

In a process geared towards accountability, the communication is established by unequal power relations and the relationship between evaluation and learning is external and instrumental, aiming mainly at enriching the third party's knowledge of the organization's status. The third party is then in control of the evaluation. But quality can only be improved if the different actors are in control of their own process and, by doing so, they get involved, learn about themselves and, as a result, change and improve the quality of their own professional activities and services to all groups of society.

4. Towards a more reflexive evaluation process.

In tune with a technicist approach, there are certain interests moving the evaluation with specific business oriented ideals and, in this context, there is a proliferation of accreditation agencies and quality assurance organizations. A small survey in the *web* can show us an array of agencies calling for the globalization of higher education and the need to produce similar professions that would contribute to the global market and search for monitoring issues of quality in the transnational movement of higher education. (Center for Quality Assurance, 2002). Also, the World Bank has stated the need for a redefinition of the role of the state in higher education and the diversification of financial sources, as well as the need for opening up to private universities. More so, it has supported business oriented organizations as it stresses new forms of education stating that, in the search for knowledge, “...to the criterion of intellectual interests and its interaction, further questions are posed: Will the solution be competitive in the market? Will it be cost effective? Will it be sociably acceptable?” (El-Kahwas, E. et al. 1998)

The University has been facing internal and external confrontations and pressures do to a New World Order and also, is living a complex situation because of the development of new technologies, the diversification of knowledge, its wide production and accessibility, a global culture that is reconstructed by local cultures. These and other new situations call for a reorganization of the university and, in that respect, evaluation can be considered as a key issue for change. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that evaluation is a process which *is not* done in neutral grounds and, as stated by Torres et al. (1996), is called to be the catalyst for organizational transformation. It is up to us, within the universities, to decide, in a critical way, which road to take, if a technicist approach of evaluation or a more reflexive one

Education is a social discipline. More so, it is a cultural process and cannot be isolated from the sociopolitical, economic situation of a country. We must therefore think about evaluation with a broad perspective, as a way of strengthening our education and, in that respect, the aspects of “Who is in control of the evaluation” and “what form does it take”? are important ones. Who sets the rules, and what space do we have to go beyond boundaries? Is evaluation oriented towards each one's academic values, does it encourages deep reflexions on teaching activities in

the light of those values or is it a largely bureaucratic exercise making judgments on statistical data only?

Through a reflexive way of doing evaluation there is space to chose some criteria, disregard certain information, silence or give birth to some voices, enable or neglect certain values, question certain privileges, open up some spaces, incorporate new ideas, understand each person's participation, build up change within people and, by doing so, contribute to better the institution by improving each one's contribution to the development of the institution. Only by enriching a participatory and reflexive process of evaluation, there will be possibilities of quality improvement and self learning for the universities.

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