Facing the Challenge of Quality in Mexican Private Higher Education: A Study of Three Cases

Gus Gregorutti

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Gustavo Gregorutti\textsuperscript{a,*}

\textsuperscript{a}University of Montemorelos

\textbf{Introduction}

Since Latin American governments have been unable to accommodate and absorb all the demand for higher education in this globalized world, an exponential number of new private universities have flourished during the last two decades (Altbach 2007). As a reaction to that, governments throughout the region are gradually increasing controls over private universities and their academic offer; Mexico is not an exception. Several federal accrediting organizations in Mexico are setting up higher standards not only to open new institutions, but also to keep them officially accredited (Oca 2006).

Getting accredited new graduate programs is becoming a major issue for private universities. Tertiary institutions are seeking to expand themselves toward the hottest markets of master’s and doctoral programs. Graduate degrees are a key element for people to obtain better jobs and improve income (Fielden and LaRocque 2008; Salmi 2007). However, there is an increasing concern among government policy makers that quality is at stake (Boville, Argüello, and Reyes 2006). Some of these tertiary institutions are graduating people without rigorous mechanisms to assess quality. This situation brings in the controversial issue of defining quality for universities (González and Espinoza 2008). It is generally understood, for instance by the National Council on Science and Technology (CONACYT), that quality is highly related to research productivity. It is assumed that producing knowledge would modify the country’s wealth (Oca 2006).

This article explored perceptions concerning issues of quality in graduate programs among education officers in select private universities of Northern Mexico. This study is highly relevant to policy makers and education administrators who deal with graduate education.

\textbf{Method}

The data was collected from four interviews at three private universities in the area of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon. The selected institutions were located geographically close to this researcher. Two interviewees were directors of graduate programs, one was a director of institutional quality, and the last one was a vice president for academic affairs. The interviews were semi-structured with a length of approximately 30 to 35 minutes in length, giving each participant the opportunity to answer open-ended questions regarding quality procedures and praxis used for their graduate programs. Each participant was asked the following introductory question: “What kind of criteria do you use to verify quality in your graduate programs?” New questions were added, depending on the flow of the conversation, with some comments from both the interviewer and interviewees. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Some field notes were made during and after each interview. In addition, some other sources of data through Internet and hard copies of records were examined to verify information shared during the interviews and to support the validity of the findings.

\textbf{Results: The Actors’ Point of View}

After analyzing the interviews, the information was grouped into common themes and experiences useful for explaining quality procedures and praxis done by these universities. The four main themes that clearly
arose from transcriptions can be organized as new challenges, issues of quality, CONACYT as a model, and new models of quality.

New Challenges

According to all the interviewees, there is an increasing demand for graduate programs. This is interpreted, in many cases, as master and doctoral programs that can be flexible and adjusted to working students, as it is expressed by this quotation:

This new economy is demanding more people with graduate degrees, it’s as if having a bachelor degree is not enough or it’s an incomplete education. They feel the need for a graduate education. And then, to what kind of graduate school are they going to access? To the one that is more convenient to students. Some of them decide to buy some sort of weekend training; some attend summer sections; others go to more research oriented programs. So, universities have the dilemma of knowing the type of graduate program they should offer in a very competitive environment that makes quality an everyday issue.

Quality is at the bottom of this problem. Should a university offer a class focused to adult working students? If so, how is quality maintained, since it is not a conventional program? They attend classes during evenings, weekends, or even over internet. Many of these graduate degrees are framed and offered within new models of training, as states the following administrator:

Most of our target includes people who want to continuing specific trainings to improve their career and profession. We do have young people for graduate programs, but they are becoming an everyday smaller portion of our student body. In somehow we are following students’ needs and we accommodate our resources to their demands. Regardless this situation, we want to offer a program that is not a bit better than a bachelor; we look forward to make an impact on a real world and not only for them to get a higher pay.

These new approaches of delivering education might be perceived as of lower quality, but, as one administrator put it, “We’re contributing to a new group of professional who are in need of getting acquainted with original solutions for their real problems.” It is in this context that official accrediting agencies are making pressure to align graduate programs with some standards. As an interviewee stated,

I perceive that the central government wants to assess quality through CONACYT, since affiliation to accrediting agencies, at this point, are volunteer and local governments give the legal consent to open a program, but they don’t have or don’t apply any quality control to assess graduate programs. I’m suspecting that by 2012 or 2013 accreditation will be mandatory.

Another clear challenge for the sampled officers was the way the central government handle accreditation. The whole process seems to be not very well coordinated creating my practical dysfunctions. Following this reasoning, one of them said that,

There is a lot of politics at the government levels. The official administrators who authorize the creation of different graduate program obey, in many cases, to groups of interest or personal relationships that are not linked to quality issues. Some of the programs are officially approved giving the universities different levels of endorsement and autonomy. This simple fact creates unevenness in the type of universities and therefore their quality. And now, some of these same officials want CONACYT to clean up the mess!

Evidently, government endorsements are also a key factor to have in mind for quality at private universities. Some regional administrations seem to have a lack of consistency when authorizing new programs and universities. There is a low comply with regulations and
bylaws to enforce higher patterns of quality. This is a serious problem that requires more research.

**Issues of Quality**

This section tries to answer issues related to common practices used to ensure quality at graduate level in the selected private universities. The responses can be grouped in several areas, as follows:

*Faculty as Qualified Teacher.* All the universities look for well trained and experienced faculty members who can be a key factor to enhance quality as an overall system. For instance, an administrator said that,

> We seek for people with years of experience and training to have classes taught with all the components and not only theory. Of course, we would like to have all professors with PhDs, but it is not always possible. However, we follow the minimum of 33 percent of doctors required by FIMPES (The Mexican Federation of Private Institutions of Higher Education). But we push hard to have a higher percentage of doctors; we don’t do just the minimum.

Another officer said, “We look for professor with a higher degree to what he or she is teaching. We try to have full time professors, even though it is not an easy task.” It is assumed that higher degrees among their professors will bring quality to classes and university performance.

*Faculty as Qualified Researchers.* Another important dimension mentioned for quality was professors’ commitment to do research. These universities are following the growing demand for faculty research productivity (Clark 2001). Research is seen as one of the central missions for these universities, as can be seen in the following quotation,

> We expect from professors some research outcomes. We want them to publish at least one article per year in a peer reviewed journal; we expect them to be part of research associations and that they may do some paper presentations at conferences. We not always have faculty members very productive, but we aim for that.

These research goals are not happening by chance. From the government and elite universities, tertiary institutions are following a similar pattern (Quddus and Rashid 2000). Through the CONACYT, by far the most influential research organization in the country, the government links science and technology to R&D. This CONACYCT is very actively working to push private universities under the umbrella of research productivity.

*Students.* All the universities sampled had some of the traditional standardized tests (PAEP, TOEFL, etc.) for screening students and therefore ensure quality. However, some are implementing interviews to see if their expectations are matching what they offer, as one of the administrators expressed it very well,

> Through the interview, we want to see whether the potential student has at least two years of experience in the area, so the student can balance what he or she brings with what is going to receive here. We want to know if we can be a good match for their needs. Many students think that they don’t have to do research, since they are in a professional oriented master. We want them to understand that research is an important part of their professional life. The challenge is to engage them, so that it’ll be part of their professional activities.

Having a good set of students is usually a key element for quality. The problem is that many of these graduate programs are moving toward professional degrees. Students can’t be side by side with professors doing research. They work 40 plus hours at week and have lots of other personal and social responsibilities making things very intensive.

*Accreditations.* The issue of being accredited is seen as an opportunity that tertiary institutions have to reassess themselves against external parameter. For instance, an officer said, “We have three accrediting agencies that set up standards for our graduate programs. They tell us, from an external point of view, whether we have a fairly good level in our programs.
However, we ask ourselves more than what they require from us.” Another added, “Accreditations help us to stay within the circuit and compete for quality. This shows us ways of doing it, since we know how or what it is required to get there. It is a good exercise of self assessment seeing where we are.”

According to these responses, quality is a never ending process. Quality is defined as a practice that universities must perform continuously to be part of a quality cycle. All of these universities are accredited by some organization and see accreditations as a very positive step toward higher levels of quality.

Interactions and Networking. Many officers for graduate programs seemed to network with different actors to feel what is going on, comparing and adjusting their offer to outside needs. Here are two key statements that confirm this fact, namely:

We also analyze professors’ points of view, different agencies such as ANUIES (National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions), FIMPES, the World Bank, and some international reports. In this way, we try to sensor what is going on and how we can adjust offering a training that would be effective and positive to our society.

Another officer added,

We involve students with business men, with employers; we also invite students to be part of our academic committees to see their point of views and consequently improving our graduate offer. Another approach is interacting with professional associations, universities, and organizations, such as the Counsel of Graduate Schools in the USA. This is a way for us to have an idea of best practices.

Universities tried to review their quality through interactions. These statements share light regarding approaches used to self assessing programs. Interestingly, many of these parameters are qualitative. This is an unending process for universities, as an officer pointed out, “We are focused on what is going well and what is not to correct and improve it.”

Dreams for Future. All of the interviewees expressed some kind of challenges and goals they would like to reach to enhance their quality. The first one said that, “We would like that every graduate professor be an expert recognized inside and outside the university. We are striving to stimulate faculty members to find their area of specialization, so that they may be consultants.

Another challenge mention was, “Getting the students with the profile we want for our graduate programs and to generate different alternatives of access for students. We need to be more creative and more flexible allowing working students to do research and practice helping them to transfer knowledge to their own reality.”

And finally one of the interviewee added that, “To adjust and adapt contents and programs to match what is happening outside the university. The tools we are using are changing. The challenge is to train students to see and read these changes in the society. This is a competency. We have to reinvent ourselves. We have to teach in a different way as we received it.”

Quality is seen as an ongoing process in which the universities are alert of their needs and are looking for answers. According to the data, officers are more than acquainted with what should be done based on their limitations and expectations. May be it is a matter of how much they can accomplish with their resources more than knowing what needs to be done.

CONACYT as a Model

All the officers interviewed had some concerns about the quality approach CONACYT is applying to accredit graduate programs. The main disagreement seemed to be gravitating toward the parameters of quality. Some of these opinions are expressed below by interviewees:

The CONACYT model tells you that if you don’t publish or don’t have professors in the SNI (National System of Researchers) you are inferior or of
a lower quality. However, we are serving a social sector that will not fit the CONACYT’s model, since it is oriented to the expert who publishes peer reviewed and indexed journals. This model is highly necessary for the sciences. But it is very restrictive and leaves out other dimensions of our real world.

Another interviewee added,

Lately, we have initiated the accreditation process with CONACYT. But we see this process as a very painful one. They require that your students must finish a master degree within 2.5 years regardless the program is research or professional oriented. The problem is that they are using the same rule for student who work 40 hours a week and in addition take a couple of classes and students who are full time and don’t work. So, we have asked explanations and alternatives, but the CONACYT people don’t seem to know reason of why this is necessary.

Another officer said, “This model of quality is under severe critic in the whole world for being too narrow. This is especially true for professional oriented programs. How come they ask me to produce lots of journals when my goal is to help the local industry to get better?”

Finally, an educational administrator added that, “Yes, CONACYT recognizes the professional oriented programs, but in practice they measure everything with the same rule: research productivity. The fact is that they penalize whoever is not doing what they promote as valid.”

According to these quotations, it seems that CONACYT goes for the easiest route, namely hard data that one can “objectively” measure. This approach does not include other forms of productivity that may be as valuable as writing a journal. It is necessary a review of what is research productivity and whether it is fitting all the dimension graduate programs are targeting for. Officers complain that this model is not taking into account the diversity of students and their needs. In other words, if students and universities cannot make a full-time or almost fulltime training with abundant research, degrees offered are not up to what is defined as quality.

New Models for Quality

A final question was posed to the officers, namely, how would you solve this tensions regarding quality at private universities? An increasing number of private institutions are offering degrees that are not supervised. What would you do about it? Some of the responses were:

I see an alternative model in what the Americans are doing. They have general, regional, and specific accreditations for area of expertise. It’s simple. The process is: where do you want to be? And show me that what you are doing helps you to get there. It is like a strategic pyramid with statements of vision, mission, objectives, strategies, etc. This assists us to clean up all the noises that prevent us from doing well. Is this task supporting our purposes for quality or is something that we do following traditions?

This following opinion talks directly about possible alternatives and models,

First, the government should publish a list of accredited universities. These accreditations can be regional or national. They can be done by associations or organizations. I think there are many models. Second, some government education agencies can double check if curriculums have the minimum they require. How much of this are they enforcing? When a master is finished, we need to be sure it’s a professional we can trust. Judging everything with the CONACYT model is to narrow. There should be many models because we have different purposes. Training researchers is not the only goal for a graduate program.

These two quotations lead to rethink what is being done, from a broader point of view. It is suggested that there are some other valid and possible alternatives for assessing quality at graduate programs. Concentrating
everything in a governmental agency can hinder its very purpose of enhancing quality, as one of the officers pointed out, “The question is then, are you sure that CONACYT’s parameters to measure quality are the best for our country and they represent most of our regional needs?”

**Final Discussion**

From one hand, the interviews revolved around the increasing demand for graduate degrees. This situation has triggered an exponential creation and offer of programs of all kind at private universities that have also raised questions about quality. On the other hand, government is stepping in trying to come up with some alternatives and procedures to handle quality at graduate level, since degrees have a public impact. Following this reasoning, government’s best bet to deal with quality seems to be CONACYT, by far the most influential and resourceful accrediting organization in México. This situation is in many cases controversial for universities with predominately professional oriented programs. Why? Because CONACYT uses research oriented patterns for judging quality. There is no problem with research since it is necessary for graduate programs. The disagreement seemed to be on the overemphasis is given to research and its dimensions. Although this is a rather complex issue, a possible solution to these tensions can be found through opening accreditation to a broader set of agencies, including private ones. In the United States, for instance, some accrediting bodies are very selective giving prestige to the universities that are accepted. These accrediting organizations use a wide range of indicators for judging quality. This implies expanding standards beyond faculty research productivity as the main factor for quality.

The interviewed officers complained about being measured against standards that work better for universities with abundant public funding. Producing research is highly expensive. It demands cutting edge facilities, time to do research, and a full time type of student who is not very much present in many professional-oriented private universities. One of the main criticisms is that CONACYT is not taking into account the professional orientation of many graduate degree programs. Although this institution claims to recognize these differences, its definition of quality resembles the knowledge production benchmarks used for academic and research-oriented programs. This situation prompts to the need of rethinking the parameters and assumptions used to define quality, meaning broader approaches of doing research. Supporting this idea of reinterpreting how research should be done, Johnson (1998), based on Boyer’s work (1990), argued that universities must be run on broader missions to reach society as well (Braxton, Luckey, and Helland 2002). Bensimon, Polkinghorn, Bauman, and Vallejo (2004) also stated that the need for bridging research and the real world is affected by the methodology of knowledge production (p. 104). They proposed a practitioner-as researcher model, as follows: “In the traditional model the individual identified as the researcher controls the production of knowledge; in the practitioner-as-researcher model, stakeholders produce knowledge within a local context in order to identify local problems and take action to solve them” (p. 105). Waghid (2002) suggested something similar when he called the traditional “Mode 1” of solving problems focused only within a disciplinary context, whereas the alternative “Mode 2” of solving problems was carried out within a specific context of application involving other participants such as students, parents, communities, educators, and other groups (p. 467). This approach to knowledge would enrich even scholars. Checkoway (2001) provided evidences saying that the engagement of faculty in community service and interaction, also called “the scholarship of engagement,” has multiple benefits, “It provides faculty members with new life experiences outside their professional circles that can stimulate research and improve teaching...faculty who consult in the community are more productive researchers and better teachers than those faculty who do not” (p. 136).

Universities and accrediting agencies need to shift their overemphasis on specialist knowledge to make it a more context-approached. This would lead to a better bond with service and therefore produce social and economical changes. Professional graduate programs
can be a new way of exploring new systems of integrating and mixing research and practice.

Finally, it is imperative to recognize the need of innovation. Quality is a crucial issue that affects universities and society as a whole. Measuring hard data and the amount of indexed journals may be easier to many statisticians. Yet, having a unilateral way of controlling and defining what quality is may produce outcomes that are against the very purpose of these interplaying institutions.

References


