

THE RISKS OF THE ACCREDITATION CULTURE

By:

Luis Alejandro Silva¹

University of the Andes Law School, Chile

1. Introduction

Several factors explain the rise and expansive growth of the processes of accreditation of the quality of higher education. The economic returns associated with a university degree, the massification of universities, and the commitment of public funds by the state are, among other reasons, motives for the certification of the quality of universities. The complexity of the processes involved in university work, on the one hand, and the sophistication of the standards for accreditation, on the other, have spawned a real culture of accreditation, which has its own language and its own specialists. The breadth of this phenomenon has reached Chilean law schools as well.

2. The pros and cons of accreditation

The accreditation process is a salutary experience for a Faculty of Law, but carries the risk of diverting attention from the principal to the accessory.

It is a healthy process, because it faces a number of requirements which are geared towards doing a better job. More or less remotely, one can notice in all accreditation standards, a link to the success of university-level educational work. Optimizing use of material resources, decreasing the potential for conflicts of interest or arbitrariness, linking research and teaching, defining a strategic plan -to name a few-, are all typical goals of an accreditation process aimed at higher levels of achievement in higher education.

It is also a risky process because it involves considerable investment of essential resources in tasks that are only incidental to the mission of the School. The effort to meet accreditation standards, usually involves the most precious resource of a School, teachers, in a task unrelated to their interests and skills. The preparation of the course syllabus (with all that may mean in certain contexts), participation in various committees to design, implement and control, the responsibility for timely information on a number of aspects of their work, are all activities that demand significant amounts of time and attention from a teacher, to the detriment of his dedication to students and research. At the end of this road, there is the risk of converting teachers to some bureaucrats and the School in a big bureaucracy.

There is a tension between these two aspects of the accreditation process, which reveals in essence the quandary of the modern university. "The vital paradigm slip to the consumerist paradigm of knowledge production, aided by the expertise and accelerated by the globalization process, explains that college life looks increasingly dominated by the logic of the business organization and subject to the same as it sorts of tensions".²

3. The risks of the accreditation culture

The advantages of a culture of accreditation are counterbalanced by its risks. It does not seem possible to reap the benefits without the risks. The alarming danger is that, pursuing

¹ Lawyer. Doctor in Law. Constitutional Law Lecturer. Universidad de los Andes Law School, Santiago-Chile.

² González, Ana Marta, "La identidad de la institución universitaria", en *Aceprensa*, 1 de diciembre 2010, n°90/10.

the benefits might become confused with the risks; that the pursuit of the conditions necessary to achieve the aim might eventually turn the satisfaction of those conditions into the aim. Although this may seem an exaggeration, there is evidence to suggest that there is a trend in this direction. I would like to offer some examples in what follows.

1. A government of managers. The administration of the Law School requires people to develop a growing familiarity with the techniques and knowledge of management science. The culture of accreditation demands this. Strategic planning, budget execution, management teams, to name a few examples, are tasks that require preparation. And the preparation takes time. The consequence is that teachers with responsibilities for government tend to lose their academic profile and become managers. Other possible consequences are that academics do not want to assume the responsibilities of government, to not lose his profile, or that they might take on these tasks, but without being fully engaged in them. Who cannot point to a close example of a scholar who has been lost, having been conquered by the management of the Faculty?

2. The prevalence of form over substance. Although the culture of accreditation is explained by a fundamental reason (or, in fact, several), the complexity of certification mechanisms actually tends to emphasize the form. Accreditation is associated with the formalization of processes, quantification of results, creation of mechanisms of design, implementation and monitoring of processes and outcomes, standardization and evaluation of policies, etc. Obviously, there is a link between the elements on this list (form) and the quality of education and research (background), but this link may be overlooked. And the consequence of this will result in disorientation, once we forget that they are mere means and not ends, and confuse the means with the end.

3. The quality as standard of consumption. Today, the accreditation of quality is a social demand. The public function that university education performs demands that it meet a minimum standard of quality, in order to be recognized and protected. But what are the criteria that define what quality is? Without being the only one, it is undeniable that the fact that education is a commodity provides a criterion for the right definition of quality. From this perspective, the certification of quality education introduces concepts typical of the market for goods and services (although their names change), such as *production process*, *advertising*, *pricing*, *customer base*, *customer satisfaction*, *market research*, etc. This "migration of concepts" is not harmless: surreptitiously slips a market logic into university work

4. Conclusion

The symptoms listed above are not a pessimistic diagnosis, but a confirmation of the tension that lies at the core of higher education today. Whether we like it or not, the tension seems inevitable and it is no use complaining. This does not mean we should get carried away without struggle against the current--because the current is dangerous. The danger is to exchange what is essential for what is accidental. And while I acknowledge that there may be difficulties in defining what is essential to a university -to a law school-, I don't think it is difficult to see that the accreditation and its culture are accidental to it.