

INQAAHE Conference-2001

Title: Processes of accreditation based on the participation of peers.

Sub-theme 3: Defining standards

Authors: Área de acreditación de grado CONEAU (Argentina)

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Abstract: The paper assigns the participation of peers of outstanding academic and professional trajectory a crucial and irreplaceable role in the processes of evaluation and accreditation of undergraduate and graduate programs. The eventual problems this participation may carry are discussed from the perspective of the procedures and design of instruments that both governments and accreditation agencies can conceive to reduce heterogeneity of criteria and arbitrariness of the evaluative conclusions held by peers. Through the example of the course of action drawn by the Argentinean agency (CONEAU) in the case of the accreditation of medical education programs, a somehow innovative way of reconstructing a comprehensive and integrated judgement will be illustrated. A holistic approach centred in the formulation of an ideal type –named “Theoretical model”- to which actual programmes are compared will be presented and advocated as fitted to circumstances where evaluation is oriented by lists of standards not only numerous but disperse and many times poorly explicit. The Argentinean experience will be presented, as an exemplar of a type of design not grounded on quantitative scales or subjective probability calculus. Finally, a crucial stage included into the procedures of evaluation, named “Consistency

meeting”, will be described as a resource for assuring coherence of the complete set of judgements produced by different groups of peers.

I. The irreplaceable role of peers in the processes of accreditation

Current practice in processes of evaluation and accreditation of undergraduate and graduate programmes assign the participation of peers a crucial and irreplaceable role. Within this type of practice, opposed to what happens in other areas of institutional activities, members of scientific and academic communities are considered to be the only ones capable of a proper assessment of their own results and practice. Criticisms posed by evaluators who do not belong to those communities are usually misconsidered as second standard. Then, peers of outstanding academic and professional trajectory become main authors of judgements about the characteristics, relevance, feasibility, adequacy and internal coherence of higher educational programmes. Nevertheless, neither prestige nor recognition assures they possess the type of competence that processes of evaluation and accreditation require, not included into their current academic training. As it has been many times pointed out, peers are open to a plurality of abuses going from bias to animosity, corporativism, co-optation, among others.

Indeed, the system of peer reviewing implies a kind of constructivism in the determination of specific criteria that will be used in the formation of particular judgements. Procedures place peers in a position such that any criteria they formulate will in principle be considered correct. Mainly when accreditation agencies do not possess a substantive concept of what would be a requisite in each discipline or subdiscipline before their participation. In such a situation, reinforced by the dynamics of disciplinary change, it

is not possible to generate and impose criteria without their concurrence. What accreditation agencies must guarantee are the adjustment to public procedures and the conformity to transparent administrative and processual rules.

First, what have to be guaranteed are the conditions of a grounded debate and the concurrence of a plurality of views about the disciplines that could enhance the impartiality of the set of peers, if not of them taken as individuals. Of course, the selection of individual peers is of the greatest importance, but not least is that of the profile of the entire group that will have to work together. When such conditions are given and a public procedure has been followed, we will say that the result is adequate, avoiding any independent criteria of adequacy that amends in a substantial way the content generated and created by peers through their discussion and agreement. Agencies aim precisely they produce that content, the validity and reliability of the proceedings laying in the publicity and transparency of the procedure.

II. How to reduce heterogeneity of criteria and arbitrariness of the evaluative conclusions held by peers.

To avoid the concretion of the abuses just mentioned and the prevalence of particular criteria favouring persons or fractions of professional or scientific communities, both governments and accreditation agencies have conceived diverse strategies. It is easy to understand the efforts to promote progressive adjustments of instruments and proceedings trying to reduce to a minimum arbitrariness, heterogeneity of criteria and the subsequent disparity of evaluative judgements. All that without converting peers in mere experts able

to apply routinely operational rules and instruments. Among those strategies the following are worth mentioning:

1. To formulate standards and explicit criteria in order to systematise the evaluation different groups of peers can make, establishing common grounds of general applicability.
2. To generate detailed procedimental norms.
3. To design evaluation instruments that serve as a general pattern for reproducible judgements.

Despite these apparent improvements, normally the evaluative performance of peers keeps having a low degree of formalisation and does not undergo the revision and open scrutiny those same peers would consider mandatory for scientific research and academic practice. Furthermore, in the area of evaluation peers have not even developed an ethos, normative, morality or leadership comparable to what Robert Merton described in 1942 for scientific practice. (cf. Jerome Ravetz 1996¹).

Indeed, the formulation of standards has been of the highest significance. Nevertheless, usually their degree of definition and specificity, their hierarchy and translation into indicators are usually poor. Indeed, the incipient and formative character of most of the accreditation systems do not provide, at least in Latin America, explicit parameters, associated with quantitative scales or a metric. Such a situation is considered undesirable by functionaries and scholars who think that numerical estimates are “objective” and make it possible to obtain a global result by simple addition. Although we

¹ See *Scientific Knowledge and its social problems*. Cambridge University Press. London. [1971] Reprinted in 1996.

do not share that complain as will become clear in the following paragraphs, we are aware of the difficulty of measuring them and of the variability of the forms in which they can be fulfilled. In fact, then, also standards allow a wide range of arbitrariness be given to peers.

III. Design and proceeding options chosen by the Argentinean agency (CONEAU)

The Argentinean agency (CONEAU) has made an option for a qualitative measuring system, conscious of the inescapable difficulties that quantitative ones pose on formative areas, where they more often become fetishes without sense than meaningful measurements. In the case of the accreditation of graduate programmes, CONEAU formulated “profiles” which deploy the features a programme should have to be accredited and be attributed a given category (A, B or C). Profiles serve as explicit models designed for comparative purposes. After a first round of evaluation undertaken from 1997 to 1998, when 1070 graduate programmes were analysed, CONEAU revisited the proceedings and formulated more detailed and substantive profiles taking previous results and substantive judgements into account for 1999-2000 Call. In the case of the accreditation of undergraduate programmes, the only national experience -of enormous importance- is that of medical education ones, undertaken in 2000 in the frame of a voluntary call. It must be remembered that undergraduate programmes are the heart of higher education in Argentina, been graduate ones yet in a process of expansion and improvement.

The course of action drawn by CONEAU embodies a somehow innovative way of reconstructing a comprehensive and integrated judgement². A holistic approach centred in the formulation of an ideal type –named “Theoretical model”- to which actual programmes are compared has been developed as a resource to articulate a list of 126 standards³, not only numerous but disperse and many times poorly explicit. As it has been said, the design is not grounded on quantitative scales or subjective probability calculus but on qualitative attributes integrated in five main dimensions of analysis that are in turn mutually related. The Theoretical model takes the whole set of standards as the expression of an ideal of a medicine programme to which actual programmes are compared. It serves also as a way to describe the situation of particular exemplars in a canonical way.

Peers are asked to assess the fulfilment of standards and to articulate single appraisals on the situation of particular programmes formulating first partial but eventually global judgements⁴. It is worth mentioning that the Call was devised in such a way that all the programmes (twelve) could be evaluated at the same time. The procedure reinforces the import of a comparative approach and stresses the feedback of an extended peer group (sixteen peers plus five observers coming from MERCOSUR) in a position to debate collectively their provisional conclusions.

Finally, a crucial stage included into the procedures of evaluation, named “Consistency meeting” has been designed as a means for assuring the coherence of the

² Adolfo Stubrin has been the member of CONEAU who, charged with the coordination of the Committee of undergraduate programmes, conducted the design both of the instruments and particular proceedings of the area.

³ The standards have been approved by the Ministry of Education in 1999 with the agreement of the Consejo de Universidades, a council where all the universities of Argentina, public and private, are represented. Standards are the result of a comprehensive debate led by Deans of Medical Schools gathered in an association named AFACIMERA.

⁴ Each programme must present a Self-study following a Guide designed by CONEAU. To form an evaluative judgement peers analyse the Self-study, make individual and group reports on it and prepare their visit to

complete set of judgements produced by different groups of peers. The aim of the meeting is to produce an open exchange of preliminary judgements among peers, consultants and members of CONEAU's professional teams. Particular programmes are presented and reviewed to generate a consensus for the sake of consistency and unity of criteria. Peers are asked to reflect on the whole set of evaluative reports and to settle the means for an improvement of the evaluative arguments and texts. Special attention is given to the relevance and sufficiency of the information taken into account and the reasonability of the conclusions in order to make possible that those who are not acquainted with the programmes be capable of following and sharing the course of decisions taken. Clarity and general applicability of the arguments are revised. CONEAU's instruments and proceedings acknowledge the wide range of diversity exhibited by higher education institutions precisely by not presuming that a single feature, important as it may be, can by itself bias or ground an evaluative judgement.

Peers are given an irreplaceable role in the process of accreditation but at the same time they are systematically asked to make criteria explicit and revisable by all stakeholders, they are urged to scrutinise collectively their own arguments and conclusions, adding publicity and transparency to a system yet in formation.

[Cecilia Hidalgo will represent the authors at the Conference]