

# Universidad de Chile: self-assessment and its effects on university's management

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**Abstract** This paper presents a brief approach to the results of a case study of a university within the Chilean higher education system, focusing on the effects of self-assessment on the university's management of undergraduate and postgraduate programs from 2011 to 2014. The research hypothesis is that the university's management, as a dependent variable, is impacted by self-assessment. The data gathering process was structured in three methodological steps: Step 1 considered the consistency analysis to evaluate the use of managerial language and visualize any consequences of planning documents after self-assessment. Step 2 involved the elaboration of a semi-structured interview that was applied to a sample of 12 key informants with the objective of encouraging qualitative categorization regarding the self-evaluation process and its effects. Step 3 entailed the construction of a questionnaire that would allow for a quantitative description. Several impacts have been reported analyzing the results from three main perspectives: organizational learning, cultural shift, and university and stakeholders.

**Keywords** University management · Self-assessment · Organizational learning · Quality assurance · Organizational culture · Stakeholders

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## Introduction

This paper presents a brief analysis of the results of a case study of a university within the Chilean higher education system that was financed by the *Comisión Nacional de Acreditación* (CNA) and developed between August 2015 and January 2016. Therefore, the data and conclusions presented here are only an expression of the Universidad de Chile's situation and cannot be generalized to other institutions. Nevertheless, it is the purpose of this publication to highlight the university's experience and raise some issues in the new managerial context (Degn 2014) in which universities are inserted. From this perspective, the present paper focuses on the effects of self-assessment on the university's management of undergraduate and postgraduate programs from 2011 to 2014.

During the last two decades, higher education in Chile has experienced an expansion cycle characterized by the diversification of its institutions, the growth of academic programs, and the increased flexibility of admission requirements (Brunner 1992, 2016). The Chilean experience has been similar to the worldwide tendency toward self-funding, privatization, and the adoption of foreign university management models, but in the absence of regular evaluations on the achievements declared by higher education institutions. This period has unveiled the segmentation of the educational system, thereby exposing the coexistence of consolidated universities and others that show deficient institutional development expressed in the quality of the programs delivered (Gonzalez and Pedraja 2015). This realization has led to a public questioning of the real value that some higher education institutions were creating in terms of the pursuit of academic excellence (Bernasconi 2008).

This absence of regulatory mechanisms has eroded social trust in higher education (Geoffroy 2014), especially in a country where college degrees are understood to be a driving force for social mobility and a requirement for economic development (OECD 2010a). Quality assurance is proposed as an alternative to traditional centralized control mechanisms in higher education, offering multiple alternatives of evaluation that can be applied to complex systems. That is why evaluating impacts and results of quality measures become relevant from a public policy perspective and their future adjustment (Torre and Zapata 2012).

For the purposes of describing the Chilean context in which self-assessment processes began to take place, it is important to notice that they were settled in the 1990s through an incipient pilot experience in which the Universidad de Chile voluntarily participated. The pilot gave the organization valuable know-how by formalizing the process, aiming to fortify a system of quality reassurance and self-regulation among higher education institutions. Back then, the public organism responsible for pilot accreditation processes was a national academic commission (*Comisión Nacional de Acreditación de Pregrado*, CNAP) that was particularly designated by the Chilean government to promote and guide these first processes and to formulate a proposal for an act of law for accreditation on higher education. Considering the experience gathered through those pilot processes, the act of law was promulgated in 2006 (ley 20.129). Since then, the accreditation agency in charge of auditing quality in Chilean higher education system is the CNA, and the results of the examination process—expressed in terms of up to 7 years of accreditation—are key to the allocation of public resources among institutions.

This auditing process starts with an evaluation (self-assessment) developed by the institution seeking accreditation. The research question that arises from the above is the following: What consequences does an intense process of self-assessment have on the way in which the university reorganizes itself with quality issues in mind? As Ewells states, “quality approaches

act principally as a ‘tax’ on institutional operations, stimulate institutions to move in new or different directions, or create planning and management assets that institutions could harness for their own purposes” (Ewell 2007, p. 120).

## Main concepts

The process toward accreditation for an academic unit in the Chilean accreditation model is composed of four phases: self-assessment, external evaluation, external report/response from the academic unit, and pronouncement on accreditation. The specific evaluation that is the matter of this research is only *self-assessment*, understood as a discerning and deliberating process in which an academic unit gathers information regarding its performance based on the purposes it declared. Both purposes and performance are analyzed in a participatory way—including the different roles involved in the academic unit such as professor, student, staff, and stakeholders—and have improvement orientations (CNA 2008). The object of this evaluation is, therefore, the academic unit, namely an undergraduate program, such as psychology, medicine, architecture, or art—or a postgraduate program, such as master’s degrees or PhDs offered by the different faculties.

Even though it is not possible to completely distinguish the effects of only one of these steps, it is the objective of this research to focus only on the activities that take place during the self-assessment period, reflecting upon the consequences that those actions have on university’s management of undergraduate and postgraduate programs. According to Torre and Zapata (2012), international literature presents the methodological difficulty of isolating causes and effects because external processes of quality assurance are only one of several elements that can influence the development of higher education institutions.

*Impacts or effects*, for the purposes of this research, are defined as observable transformations—within academic units—that can be related to self-assessment. These transformations can be planned or unintended, have consequences that could be described as positive or negative, and be short or long term from a temporal perspective (OECD 2010b). All kinds of transformations should be identifiable as changes that are settled in some way, such as a new organizational structure—for example, a unit or department—procedure or cultural shift. The period in which to observe change starts with self-assessment (2011–2014) until the fieldwork developed for this research was conducted (September–December 2015).

Self-assessment is understood as an *organizational diagnosis* (Rodríguez 2004) led by some participants of the organization with a wide involvement of all its members, thereby generating better commitment, opening communicational channels, and reevaluating policies, procedures, files, and culture (Villalta 1998). The main assumption behind the objective of this research is that the evaluation itself, as a way of carrying out an organizational diagnosis, has an *impact* on the institution: “‘data gathering’ and ‘diagnosis’ are separated from the category ‘intervention.’ What every anthropologist and systems theorist knows is that measuring a human system, indeed any system, changes it to some unknown degree” (Schein 2005, p. 136).

*Management* is about putting together an organization to accomplish its mission by evaluating available resources; formulating a plan of action while constantly keeping track of where the organization is going (Magretta 2012). Management is related to specific functions such as communications, making decisions under conditions of uncertainty and strategic planning (Drucker 1986). When it comes to *academic management*, the discussion focuses on the corporatization of universities (Mintzberg and Rose 2003) and its effects on

organizations that are traditionally characterized by a weak central governance and a form of decision-making derived from consensus, in opposition to a centralized oriented organization (Meyer 2002). As a consequence of the new and more complex environmental demands made to academic institutions, they become more businesslike in their operations, assuming a managerial approach in their work toward goal achievement. Then, general management definitions are key to describing how universities develop new organizational arrangements in order to provide knowledge and research in this new context (EUSUM 2014).

Within Chile's higher education system and the self-assessment processes that have taken place since the 1990s, there has been an internalization of a series of management concepts that are defined and understood by the different actors involved. These definitions are specified as a set of managerial actions that the CNA explicitly evaluates regarding academic unit management, with a distinction between undergraduate management and postgraduate management (CNA 2008).<sup>1</sup>

The research hypothesis is that the university's management, as a dependent variable, is impacted by self-assessment (independent variable) that is often understood to be the beginning of a process that seeks accreditation. The specification of the variables and their operationalization are shown on Table 1.

## Methodological steps

This research approached its main objective in three steps. In general terms, the *research design* can be described as exploratory, qualitative-quantitative, transversal, non-probabilistic, and gathers documental and empirical data. Each step collects data that enables the elaboration of the following research instrument. From the content analysis of strategic documents in step one, we were able to gather information about the main concerns in academic administration toward quality improvement. Besides the analysis and description of data, information of main issues in academic management were considered for the qualitative step. The key informants who were interviewed provided testimonies that brought forth experience, judgment, and points of view on those issues during a self-assessment process. The qualitative description, in turn, made it possible to elaborate upon the questionnaire applied in step 3. During the last step, we were able to measure how relevant the different issues were to a wider universe of academic units within the University. Each methodological step is described as follows.

Step 1 considered the consistency analysis between two specific documents for each academic unit selected. The documents that declared the strategic planning of the faculty are called institutional development plans (IDPs), which were contrasted with the document that established improvement plans (IPs) for academic programs, after the process of self-assessment (Fig. 1).

These two documents were analyzed using the content analysis methodology (Krippendorff 2013), which was applied to a non-probabilistic sample. This purposive sample (Table 2) responded to several criteria relevant to this research, including academic units that had been accredited during the period in question (2011–2014); a quota criterion based on management

<sup>1</sup> These definitions are part of the conceptual framework presented for this research, but are mentioned in Table 1.

**Table 1** Operationalization of research variables

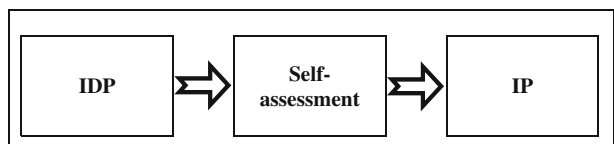
Independent variable	Dependent variable	Impact
Self-assessment dimensions: - Process gathering information • Information gathering • Reflecting on information • Improvement plan (IP) - Team process • Group in charge of • Extended team • Retro alimentation process	Undergraduate management dimensions: - Program’s purpose - Institutional integrity - Organizational, administrative and financial structure - Curricular structure - Human resources - Effectiveness of teaching/learning process - Results of the formation process - Infrastructure, technical support and teaching resources - Relationships with national stakeholders - Relationships with international stakeholders Postgraduate management dimensions: - Institutional environment - Organizational system - Character, objectives, and graduate profile - Admission requirements and selection process - Program’s structure and study plan - Students progression and evaluation - Faculty members’ characteristics - Trajectory, productivity, and sustainability - Regulatory definitions - Institutional support and infrastructure - Relationships with national stakeholders - Relationships with international stakeholders - Self-regulation capacity	Transformation or effects - According to planning criteria: • Planned • Unplanned - According to appraisalment criteria: • Positive • Negative - According to temporal criteria: • Short term • Long term

Source: Self-elaboration

definitions (different for undergraduate academic units and postgraduate programs); and a heterogeneity criterion considering programs developed on the different university’s campuses—that belong to different knowledge areas—as well as programs with extensive and limited experiences in accreditation processes. The objective of this step was to evaluate the use of managerial language and visualize any consequences of planning documents after evaluation, thereby maintaining strategic orientations.

Step 2 involved the elaboration of semi-structured interviews (Taylor and Bogdan 1984) that were applied to a sample of 12 key informants who fit the same heterogeneity criterion mentioned in step 1, aiming to provide a wide scope in speech. The objective of these interviews was not to compare or develop any generalization, but to encourage qualitative categorization and sense-making within the organization (Weick 1995) regarding the evaluation process and its effects.

**Fig. 1** Document process elaboration (self-elaboration)



**Table 2** Sample of academic units in which documents were analyzed

	Academic unit			Total
	Undergraduate program	Master's degree program	PhD degree program	
Population	69	116	38	224
Sample	12	15	7	35

Source: Self-elaboration based on research data

The interview contained 13 questions developed according to the operationalization of the variables presented in the hypothesis. Conversations took place in each interviewee's office and lasted an average of 75 min. The interviewees' attitudes can be described as honest, allowing an open conversation that enabled experiences and impressions to arise and be critically reflected on. This critical perspective showed points of view that exposed weaknesses, differences of opinion within the groups, and a solid learning process that did not evidence discourses that could be seen as "politically correct."

Step 3 entailed the construction of a questionnaire based on the information gathered in the first two steps that would allow for a quantitative description. The objective was to apply it to a pilot sample in order to develop a factorial analysis and propose a definitive questionnaire for the university to use in the future. The instrument contained 21 items that could be answered using a Likert scale of four values ranked according to level of agreement.

The sample was randomly selected within the population of professors who belong to academic units that have had self-assessment experiences between 2011 and 2014. The sample size was determined by considering 10 cases for each of the 21 items in order to develop a factorial analysis (Velicer and Fava 1998). From a sample measured at  $n = 210$ , the effective response was 88% (185). Before the factorial analysis, the databases were tested by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett's test of sphericity to verify the pertinence of this reduction of information technique. The results show that the professors' perception on the effects of the self-assessment process can be grouped into four factors, which explain almost 65% of the total variance.

### Conceptualization of results: self-assessment as a challenge for university management

Research findings are focused on the consequences that self-assessment has on managerial issues according to the dimensions presented for the dependent variable (Table 1). The dimensions that were recognized as relevant have been worked within four general themes that help to bring issues together and provide a wider comprehension of the data, thus avoiding a casuistic analysis, and aiming to provide a broader discussion. In other words, the elements shown in Table 1 can be found throughout the discussion. On the other hand, this systematization of the results, according to general themes, allows for the integration of information gathered in the different steps, enriching the argumentation and providing a discussion beyond the particularities of the Universidad de Chile.

## Relevant dimensions for academic management

The results of the factorial analysis, which is a consequence of the research strategy that divides the data gathering process into three steps, raise four dimensions. These dimensions are an expression of the Universidad de Chile's experience, but at the same time they can be compared to the international discussion of universities' transformation, showing that the experience of the one under study is not far from a general process. In order to present the aforementioned, this part provides an interpretation of each factor and a comparison with what Stensaker (2008) identifies as tendencies in which impacts of quality assurance are subscribed within higher education institutions:

- (a) Impact on curricular structure. This dimension includes items related to the impact of evaluation on the structure and purpose of academic programs, including a permanence period used to fulfill graduation requirements as well as the learning from students. It implies information related to internal processes within the university. This impact is also an example of what is later described in the “[Organizational learning](#)” section.

From Stensaker's perspective, this factor can relate to *power*, given that changes in curricular structure and purposes of academic programs imply the modification of study programs and establish new criteria in the designation of contents and the way they are imparted. As a result, tension arises with more conservative sectors of academic members who perceive an imposition of limits to academic freedom, subtracting power from some members of the university community.

- (b) Impact on the linking to the environment. This dimension includes items that evaluate the way in which the university/academic unit has managed the university's relation with stakeholders, specifically postgraduates, in terms of gathering data and contacting them for management purposes.

This component relates to what the author mentions with respect to *public relations*. Under the competitive context in which universities are settled and the pressure performed by their stakeholders, quality assurance is presented as a marketing tool, showing how they do and will develop their work, knowing that the environment values the universities' contribution toward research and innovation. In relation to the concept of stakeholders used by Stensaker, this effect, which is designated as linking to the environment, is later described in the “[University and stakeholders](#)” section.

- (c) Communication of self-assessment's results within the academic unit. This dimension gathers items that evaluate how academic members of each unit are aware of the results and commitments that are proposed as a part of the improvement plan.

This category relates to the degrees in permeability that higher education institutions have accomplished as they have gone through accreditation processes, involving more information available because of the professionalization of those processes and the creation of more precise roles within the university community.

- (d) Evaluation culture. These items refer to the strengthening of the information gathering process and responsibility assignments for the development of the evaluation process and improvement plans. These effects are discussed in a broader way in the “[Cultural shift](#)” section.

Professionalization of higher education institutions entails, among other things, the elaboration of manuals, instructions, specific role and function assignment, visualizing what before was considered “tacit knowledge”. This phenomenon is based on better data gathering on the different institutional policies and their main results.

## Organizational learning

Sporn (1996) refers to universities as complex organizations, bringing up classic authors, including Mintzberg in 1982, Cohen and March in 1974 or Lawrence and Lorch in 1986, who describe the characteristics of universities in terms of structure. One of the consequences of self-assessment raised up by this study is organizational learning (Corsi 2002; Davenport and Prusak 1998), which is understood as the ability of the academic unit—beyond any specific individual—to learn from mistakes and listen to the demands made by the environment, triggering adaptation, organizational change and generating consequences in terms of management.

An example is the information-collecting method. During the first self-assessment procedures, data collection was described as artisanal or handmade. On the one hand, there was more than one database from which to collect the information requested, which led to uncertainties concerning the numbers. On the other hand, some elements of the demanded information were not on the databases, and those aspects of management were consequently left out. Therefore, the first self-assessment processes involved “building up the history” of the program, based on a previous revision of paper documentation. This was translated into numbers and then transformed into statistical information. A frequent example is the institutional relationship with postgraduates and the academic unit’s connection with employees.

After this first, and sometimes second, evaluation experience, the database was elaborated and constantly updated, which brought about an important organizational change in terms of structure. The organization created new units in charge of professionals responsible for updating data. After this adaptation process, the next evaluations did not require long periods of data gathering, moving faster to the interpretation and discussion of the information that was already being managed by these new professionals. Those next steps, having been done previously, were also easier to achieve.

On the other hand, self-assessment is described as complex, not only because of its logistical difficulties but especially because it brings up “mixed feelings.” In this respect, it is possible to distinguish between the execution of the evaluation process (data gathering and discussions) from the effects that the whole evaluation experience presents to the organization in terms of meaning (Luhmann 2007). Although execution is always associated with a heavy amount of extra work, the results are perceived as positive because the process is a useful and necessary exercise in which the organization must look at itself critically and redefine its future orientations.

The impact of the evaluation process in terms of organizational learning differs according to the academic unit. In some cases, it is just a revision or tuning up of knowledge of certain aspects that have not been deeply analyzed, but in other cases, it can even become a *constitutional moment* (Ackerman 1999)—that is to say, a moment in which the team in charge of executing the evaluation process becomes aware of the academic unit’s rules and actively discusses how to change them in order to fulfill institutional quality goals. This discussion ends in a complete reformulation of the program, which finally leads to accreditation:



One of the reforms we implemented was that the academic committee had to be elected by the academic members (claustró)... The evaluation process and subsequent accreditation was the basis of this new election regulation, which is now written down (Interviewee 11).

A common challenge to self-assessment is the concepts that have to be used.

I wondered, ‘What are the important issues? What are the relevant criteria in order to develop an evaluation that makes sense?’ All these, besides familiarizing with all these bizarre concepts that we had to use, it was a whole new language that we had to learn (Interviewee 11).

The academic units related to business schools and those associated with organizational studies were the ones that understood the language and methodology because it was part of their ethos and professional experience. For them, an evaluation process was another way of approaching continuous improvement (Harrington 1997), which had always been an ongoing effort for this type of academic unit.

For others, the language and methodology used for evaluation and IPs that arise from that process are per se associated with disciplines that focus on management. It is important to highlight this issue because the social differentiation process, which has triggered high levels of functional specialization (Luhmann 1982), is manifested—as a phenomenon of today’s society—in a highly specified nomenclature. This entails that the requirements of evaluation be misunderstood by the particularities of other disciplines within academic units.

In other words, understanding management as a path that provides input for decision-making and improving organizational development after a diagnosis is also a learning process. Maintaining continuity with this process and the notion of institutionalizing it are not evident in every academic unit. What can be observed is a difference regarding levels of management, according to the capacity of each unit to achieve the objectives in their IPs.

From the academic unit perspective, an important issue that arises is the usual delay of graduation periods. After observing the data of student permanence in a specific program, authorities have detected the factors that promote postponement and how to avoid them. This problem has been solved through a series of decisions, including the formalization of procedures that establish a maximum period for the thesis-writing process or generating links between undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

Finally, the creation of the Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Unit<sup>2</sup> (EAQU) (at an institutional level) or the evaluation units and committees (at the academic unit level) are considered an effective mechanism of generating organizational learning. EAQU is frequently named by the interviewees as an essential asset for self-assessment because its members act as internal/external experts. They are internal experts because they represent the university and have internal knowledge of its culture and procedures. However, as actors who are not part of the academic unit, it gives the process an impartial expert view that enriches the evaluation. Having gone through several processes, the members of this unit have gained the experience needed to offer a broader perspective to each academic unit when acting as advisors. On the other hand, their specialized role also allows them to provide unfamiliar methodology and

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<sup>2</sup> Unidad de Autoevaluación, Acreditación y Calidad (UAAC) is the unit in charge of coordinating and supervising self-assessment and accreditation processes that aim to improve the academic unit’s management, as well as academic programs according to the strategic guidelines and institutional development project established by the Universidad de Chile.

language knowledge to academic units whose areas of expertise differ from those of management.

### Cultural shift

According to Harvey and Stensaker (2008), culture was understood as an integrated product of social interaction that is impossible to differentiate from other factors. From that perspective, the authors relate the interest in higher education quality as something associated with the concept of culture.

This paper suggests another approach to organizational culture, when addressing to quality standards, in order to analyze the cultural shift that the Universidad de Chile has experienced. One of the discussions of the concept of organizational culture is its ability to change. According to Schein (2010, p. 18), organizational culture can be defined as a “pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.” Rodríguez (2011), paraphrasing Merton’s critique of functionalist anthropology in 1949, argues for upholding a culture as using answers that have proven to be historically efficient, can lead us to think that a specific cultural characteristic is part of an organization because it is necessary and useful, which makes changing it highly inconvenient. However, it is common sense that many cultural elements are neither positive nor indispensable.

The definition that Rodríguez (2011, p. 267) proposes is that if we understand organizations as an auto-poietic system of decisions, then organizational culture is a set of basic premises over which the organization constructs such decisions. These premises appear to be “undecidable and undecided”—namely, as if they had never been the consequences of a decision. This is why they do not seem easy to intentionally change. Nevertheless, this premise slowly changes, along with the organization’s adaptation to its environment. In other words, organizational culture is an expression of the way the organization *is* in the world, and it will change as the organization changes *itself* along with the way it interprets the world around it.

This theoretical perspective provides a fertile conceptual framework with which to understand the profound impacts that can be described along the different stages of this research. First of all, the different processes of evaluation have gone through transformations in which the *meaning* assigned to the involvement of the academic units has shifted away from academic and disciplinary issues only, understanding this as a consequence of the adaptation of the Universidad de Chile to the new quality standards established by the CNA and other stakeholders.

An example can be shown by the findings of step 1, where the revised documents were written in a language that is similar to managerial concepts, which allows for the operationalization of goals in terms of quantifiable data. Thus, it is possible to say that the planning documents contain the main elements that were being observed, such as strengths and weaknesses, objectives, indicators, activities, evidences, deadlines, and someone accountable for the fulfillment of these elements.

Consequently, the academic units have managerial planning documents that are capable of putting in order the orientations and the results of a self-assessment process. The cultural shift can be described as a professionalization of managerial roles, which means understanding the administration of universities and faculties from a more active and entrepreneurial perspective.

Table 3 shows the items that measure faculty perceptions toward the effects of the evaluation process on the academic unit’s management, as a result of step 3. Most of the

items garnered over 60% agreement, which means that the evaluation seems to have been relevant in terms of its impacts on academic units.

Step 2 shows that team’s reflection on data gathered varies between academic units, which is probably a result of the organizational culture (Luhmann 2010; Rodríguez 2011) of each unit. What can be described as common to all of them is that the data gives team members a new impression of the unit that pushes them to rethink what has been done until then. An interesting finding was that, even though many actors within the Universidad de Chile first thought that pursuing institutional accreditation in the national context was pointless—considering the leadership position this university holds within the Chilean university system—dealing with the data gathered generated deep self-criticism: “afterwards, we thought that we were doing everything wrong.” That led to the proposal of improvement objectives that would necessarily trigger an upgrade in quality if those objectives were fulfilled.

Another issue that the interviewers address is the idea that there is a risk in achieving the objectives of the IP if there is a lack of support from the current authority, which is understood as political will (Mintzberg 1983, 1985) or the demonstration of their disposition to expend personal resources. In other words, a heavy load of extra work has no meaning and is not achievable if leadership is not committed to the process and fails to empower those in charge:

There is another important matter. These processes need political support. It is absolutely necessary. If the committee or the coordinator isn’t completely empowered by the current authority, the process sleeps and stands by without any effect. The idea here is that we have an active participation of most organizational members, students, academics and staff, and also authorities when it is needed (Interviewee 5).

In this respect, some academic units have resolved that, during the self-assessment, authorities—such as deans or school directors—keep their distance in order to maintain neutrality. Nevertheless, the consequences of that evaluation that are established in the IPs have to be signed by the authority to ensure institutional commitment and resources for its

**Table 3** Evaluation’s main effects on an academic unit’s management

Item	Agrees (%)	Disagrees (%)	Does not know/does not answer (%)
1 Evaluation has directly impacted information management at the academic unit level	61	27	12
2 Evaluation has directly impacted program structures	64	26	10
3 Evaluation has directly impacted the identification of elements that delay graduation	63	21	16
4 Evaluation has directly impacted the reduction of scholarship periods among students	45	31	24
5 Evaluation has directly impacted the gathering of information about graduates	65	19	16
6 Evaluation has directly impacted the definition of purpose among programs	61	27	12
7 The evaluation process is not useful for improving academic programs	14	73	13
8 The evaluation of academic units has had a concrete impact on improving the quality of the students’ development	66	13	21

Source: Self-elaboration based on research data

fulfillment. Thus, political will is institutionalized and turned into a written document that the faculty must observe.

In the opinion of some interviewees, this political will has to be transferred to a specific team in charge of controlling the achievements of the IP as a tangible way of implementing organizational change. Units that have not achieved this level of institutionalization of improvement are concerned about the possibility of reaching the next accreditation process and only then beginning to work on improvement commitments and the academic unit's performance. In other words, a method is needed for the institutionalization of the improvement implementation or organizational change:

When the work team was conformed, we wanted quality assurance as a purpose, independent of an external accreditation process. This meant that we had to find a way in which decisions would endure. That is why we generated this structure and operating procedure, which wouldn't end after accreditation was settled. It is now an always active ongoing process (Interviewee 10).

However, as important as leadership may be—which is based on an authority's political support and the conformation of a team in charge—, this research notes the need to formalize any initiative. The Universidad de Chile is described as a “legalist institution,” which means that it is very much attached to written norms. From this perspective, written norms fulfill a function that is not always associated with leadership, which changes periodically along with the political objectives that are declared as relevant. Initiatives can endure over time when they are written down as mandates or, from a sociological perspective, institutionalized (Weber 1964). In other words, the organization needs to elaborate on regulative documents, protocols, and the definitions of committees' functions, which are understood as initiatives that allow for the fulfillment of the objectives presented in the IP. The best scenario would be to establish permanent responsibilities related to those initiatives.

Finally, this cultural impact, which is understood as the settlement of a continuous improvement perspective—based on evaluations that produce improvement objectives that are routinely conducted and reevaluated at the end of the accreditation period—cannot be described as homogeneous across academic units. On one hand, although actors from both undergraduate and postgraduate programs describe numerous effects of evaluation, the continuity of the cycle is not always guaranteed, especially when it comes to tracking and controlling the improvement plans after accreditation has been assigned. Nevertheless, the establishment of “quality assurance” can be distinguished as an organizational value that gives meaning to any goal and motivates organizational change.

It is possible to infer that the difficulties presented at the beginning of the evaluation process—especially the first experiences—explain part of the insufficient continuity of these activities in some academic units. From the opposite perspective, the so-called quality culture present at the university plus a generalized commitment and sense of belonging—which were identified during the qualitative step—have acted as an incentive to fulfill the process and its improvement objectives.

Harvey and Stensaker (2008, p. 435) state that “the quality culture concept is heavily related to political ambitions, nationally and internationally, of changing the way higher education institutions work and how they function in a more fundamental way (...) in such a political perspective, quality culture is a tool for preparing the institutions for the consequences of this autonomy, both with respect to how they handle external demands (for example, the ability to respond to external quality assurance schemes), and internal developments in governance (for

example, promoting stronger internal management structures).” Relating the findings presented here to the authors’ proposal, we could say that the capacity of the academic units to learn and adapt to new quality demands and the cultural shift—understood as the settlement of a continuous improvement perspective toward quality—is not complete without mentioning the influence of the environment. The “ability of the university to respond to external quality assurance schemes,” as well as to other standards and demands, are a relevant issue that explain the effects of evaluation processes on the university’s management of undergraduate and postgraduate programs or, in the words of the cited authors, the effects on the “internal developments in governance.”

## University and stakeholders

Increasing global interconnections have amplified interdependencies between actors, which entails that the actions of any organization have consequences for and are impacted by others. Similarly, information technologies have allowed a diversification of the sources from which information arises, as well as the access to them (Stark 2009). Actors that not long ago were irrelevant to the decisions made at a university now constitute an important viewpoint, adding complexity to university management. “Stakeholders” refers to any group or individual that can affect or be affected by the accomplishments of the organization, including its employees, clients, suppliers, shareholders, environmentalists, governmental agencies, etc. (Freeman 1984).

In Chile, the accreditation system considers the relation with external actors as an important topic, being one of the evaluation criteria the so-called *vinculación con el medio* that can be understood as “linking to the environment.” This criterion has gained more importance in recent decades, consistently with global tendencies, being nowadays an aspect of institutional development that is carefully examined. From an analytical perspective, we will consider two kinds of stakeholders: *national* and *international*.

Considering a national standpoint, Ewell (2007) analyzes institutional reactions on quality assurance in the USA during the last 30 years, identifying as the main influential actors the accreditation agencies, state authorities, and federal government. An Iberoamerican study (Lemaitre and Zenteno 2012) that sought to implement a common definition on quality culture considered the opinion of actors beyond academic members by also including accreditation agencies, students, graduates, and employers. In other words, universities are making decisions in terms of management, following quality objectives, based on the influence of several national stakeholders.

Step 1 shows that IDP and IP have some differences in approach: IDP documents indicate a tendency toward institutional objectives—mainly the connection to stakeholders and the quality of faculty members—unlike IP documents, which show an inclination toward objectives focused on student support. This difference in approach is explained by the premise that the IDPs are strategic documents that orient the faculty as a whole, whereas the IPs are focused on specific academic units or postgraduate programs so that they are oriented at different scales. The relationship with stakeholders is then a strategic one, which preferably has to be managed by a wider range of time scope and bonded by written documents legitimated by the dean.

An example of a new connection to national stakeholders, triggered by the requirements established by the CNA for accreditation is the linking of the university to graduates and employees, who were two of the blind spots of the organization. What used to happen is that once students graduated, the university maintained little contact with them. Tightening up these relationships benefits the program in terms of feedback, as well as those who currently

study and have studied at the Universidad de Chile. An example of this is the creation of employment indicators.

Also, some academic units have formed close relationships with organizations in which students can complete internships. After the residency period, they ask for a detailed report of the students' weaknesses in order to provide them with personalized support of the acquisition of specific abilities or competences (through specific courses, mentoring, or coaching). On the other hand, at the end of each semester, the academic units develop focus groups with future employees with the aim of knowing the competences required for their jobs and adapting the curricula to the needs of the labor market. This is a good example of structural coupling (Maturana and Varela 1984), where the organization as a system adapts its structure—in this case, the academic program—to the requirements of the environment, namely the labor market represented by specific stakeholders.

In the context of linking the organization to the national environment, there are new requirements for academic members—besides the traditional role of teaching and research—as opinion leaders, which means that they should interrelate with the media or act as experts in governmental commissions. Academic units now have an expert in communication in charge of relating scholars with the media, in order to have the faculty and the university frequently present—which could be considered a kind of marketing. As the presence of the academic unit in the media is part of the accreditation criteria, this professional keeps constant track of each press note and interview in which professors have been involved and, at the end of the year, some units also reward the most “present academic members in the media.”

From an international perspective Ellingboe (1998, p. 199) defines internationalization as an “ongoing, future-oriented, multidimensional, interdisciplinary, leadership-driven vision that involves many stakeholders working to change the internal dynamics of an institution to respond and adapt appropriately to an increasingly diverse, globally focused, over-changing external environment.” These dynamic changes in the environment—national and international—must be managed by the university (Sporn 1996).

Five components integrate this internationalization process: (a) college leadership; (b) faculty members' international involvement in activities with colleagues, research sites, and institutions worldwide; (c) the availability of study abroad programs for students; (d) the presence and integration of international students, scholars, and visiting faculty into campus life; and (e) international co-curricular units (Ellingboe 1998; Bartell 2003). According to the qualitative step, what the Universidad de Chile has traditionally considered as internationalization has been restricted to letter (b), leaving the relationship to international stakeholders in the hands of scholars. This perception is not uncommon, which is why several studies in the internationalization of higher education institutions focus on the motivation of faculty members to engage in international activities (Li and Tu 2015).

Nevertheless, some new policies at different faculties—as well as the university as a whole—have settled the purpose of making the university a leading institution in Latin America, focusing not only on scholars, but also on students. This entails, on one hand, the need to systematically bring students from abroad, and for the first time, setting a system of student assessment in order to improve their experience of studying at the university. On the other hand, while the international co-curricular units are still on an experimental phase, there are regional, bilateral, and organizational alliances being settled that increase the opportunities of local students to study abroad, along with an improvement on students' English skills.

Our students should be able to work at any multinational organization, which is why we give them the English training level they personally need. If they come from a school where they had no English training, every semester at the university, they have to go through English classes to level up. But if they come from English schools, we give them the opportunity to improve their skills by taking classes on the language faculty (Interviewee 12).

## Conclusion

Even though it is difficult to generalize any statement within an institution as large and diverse as the Universidad de Chile, some common elements have emerged throughout the course of this research. Firstly, regarding the main purpose—the effects of the self-assessment processes on the university’s management of undergraduate and postgraduate programs during the period from 2011 to 2014—several impacts have been reported to support the suggested hypothesis. Within the three main themes presented as findings—organizational learning, cultural shift, and universities stakeholders—we found managerial effects in areas such as data gathering and information access, planning of curricula and teaching, professors’ career development, and relationships with the national and international environment.

It is interesting to note that the impacts of the self-assessment process on university management can be described as both structural and cultural. In terms of structure, the evidence shows that during the evaluation process, new units in charge of professionalizing management were created and socially validated as a consequence of the requirements. This was also influenced by the language and the criteria for educational quality that were imposed by the national accreditation system created by the CNA. The information gathered implies that these new units were specifically created for evaluation purposes and have facilitated the sporadic needs of evaluation as well as its continuity, thus implementing improvement plans in the medium and long term. They are also an example of how the organization’s structure adapts to the changes in its environment, which calls for new demands in terms of quality.

With respect to cultural changes, the insertion of new and different requirements such as the ones that come with self-assessment generates both gratification and tensions within the academic units. On one hand, academic members recognize the gains and institutional learning that can be associated with self-assessment, acknowledgment that allows the legitimation of this exercise for quality assurance. However, it is also true that these practices produce internal tensions that relate to extra work and the lack of recognition of these functions when it comes to academic evaluation. The way the organization is able to deal with these antagonist effects in order to reach some kind of balance is a key consideration when it comes to establishing regular self-assessment processes and the positive results on improving quality in the education that the Universidad de Chile provides.

The proposal raised by this research is that any measurement conducted in the future that considers university management issues with quality improvement purposes should include (a) an organizational culture perspective and the different ethos that can be found in the diversity of academic units, (b) the relationship established by the university and its stakeholders, acknowledging the influence of the environment over today’s

universities, and (c) the ability of each unit to learn. All three aspects account for the flexibility a university has in order to adapt and provide the quality standards that are expected.

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