

QUALITY AND RESEARCH ASSESSMENT IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

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Abstract

Twenty years have passed from the Sorbonne Declaration in 1999 to the current day, a timeframe in which we have seen the incredible changes that have happened in higher school systems in numerous nations of the world, explicitly the nations having a place with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Four nations began by marking the 1999 Declaration, today there are now forty-eight nations associated with the EHEA. In this article, a visit through the achievements that have been forming and plying the EHEA is made, resolving the most pertinent issues tended to in the various gatherings of the priests of advanced education. Then, we will stop at quite possibly the most important pointer of the EHEA: the quality affirmation frameworks that, in light of the Bologna Process, have been conveyed both at the supranational and public levels. We will make an outline of the execution of instructive quality in the nations. At long last, we will consider the effect that the viewpoint of instructive quality has had in the nations of the European Higher Education Area.

Keywords: European Higher Education Area; Supranational Policies of Education; Instructive Policy; Educational Quality.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century we find ourselves with two important processes that seek harmonization in educational matters of the Member States: the Copenhagen Process (2002) and the Bologna Process (1999), aimed at Vocational Training and Higher Education, respectively. Both processes promote cooperation and convergence at European level in higher education teaching systems (Romero Godoy, 2018).

Gone is that first meeting at the Sorbonne that inspired what we know today as the European Higher Education Area.

«Recently, the European process has taken extremely important steps. Despite the importance that this has, we should not forget that when we talk about Europe, we should not only refer to the euro, the banks and the economy, but we should also think of a Europe of knowledge. It is our duty

to consolidate and develop the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of our continent. These have been modeled, to a great extent, by the universities, who still play an essential role in their development». (Sorbonne, 1998).

The birth of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with the declaration of the Sorbonne in Paris in 1998 gave the starting signal to one of the most emblematic and well-known initiatives of the Union, whose ultimate purpose was to make of Europe a unique space for higher education students, characterized by excellence in teaching and research (Pérez, 2015).

At said meeting in Paris, the ministers of the Member States decided to work on the «creation of a European area dedicated to Higher Education, where national identities and common interests can be related and strengthened for the benefit of

Europe, its students and of its citizens in general» (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998, paragraph 14).

This participation, which the ministers called the European area of higher education, would mean, for the member countries of the EHEA, a series of reforms in their educational institutions, both at a structural level and at a curricular level.

The countries participating in this first meeting and that signed said declaration were France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. This political pact gave an importance never before given to higher education in Europe and would change decisively the organization and operation of university education institutions belonging to the area. We will see it carefully below (Pérez, 2015).

2. The EHEA: Twenty years of cooperation in Higher Education

2.1. The beginnings of the European Higher Education Area (1999-2010)

«After the meeting in Sorbonne (1998), there was a second meeting in 1999, in which the Bologna Declaration was signed, in which the ministers of the participating countries committed themselves to trying to harmonize the policies regarding their university education system through the following six common elements» (Romero Godoy, 2018, p. 85). or objectives:

-The comprehensiveness and comparability between degrees, this would include the Supplement to the higher education degree that would allow the detailed description and definition of each one of the degrees, while facilitating the access of graduates to the labor market.

-A structure of credits in the degrees: university education would have a common structure of two levels, the first level corresponding to the first cycle studies will be the Degree, the second level corresponding to the second cycle studies will be the Postgraduate. Access to the second cycle or Postgraduate can only be done once the first cycle or Degree has been passed.

-A European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, ECTS, which would allow a comparable academic credit system between different countries and higher education institutions. Each one of the credits that constitute the degrees defines the total working time of the student.

-Promotion of the mobility of students and professors of higher education.

-Joint degrees in which different Higher Education institutions participate and the quality assurance of education in the participating countries.

-Promotion of the European dimension in higher education. After the Bologna Declaration in 1999 there have been several meetings between ministers of higher education and other agents involved in the Bologna process, meetings that have allowed the continuity of this project to the present day. The acting European ministers in higher education meet regularly to review the progress made and set directions and priorities of the process that higher education must follow.

In the year 2001 its meeting is in Prague, after which a communiqué is elaborated that collects the questions dealt with in it entitled: «Fostering the Bologna Process». In this meeting, the corresponding ministers of higher education review the objectives set out in the Bologna Declaration, as well as its scope to date (Marchesi and Martín, 2019).

This review is carried out on each of the elements that make up the EHEA already described: the adoption of an easily readable and comparable system, the implementation of a system essentially based on two cycles, the establishment of a credit system, the promotion of mobility of students and teachers, and the promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance. Seeing the ministers, a high degree of achievement of these objectives, they add important elements such as:

quality through evaluation, accreditation and certification mechanisms.

-Promote learning throughout life (Lifelong Learning).

-Promote the quality of Higher Education institutions and students, considering quality as

the basic condition for trust, relevance, mobility, compatibility and attractiveness of the EHEA.

-Promote interest in the European Higher Education Area, so as to generate exchange and collaboration networks with students from other countries, as well as with other Higher Education institutions.

«For the ministers «the construction of the European Higher Education Area is a condition to improve the attractiveness and competitiveness of Higher Education

or similar procedures that institutions Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (hereinafter ENQA) also begins to collaborate in the Bologna Process:

«The Ministers appealed to universities and other higher education institutions, state agencies and the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), in cooperation with the corresponding bodies in other countries which are not members of ENQA, to collaborate in the establishment of a common framework of reference and to spread the best practice»(Declaration of Prague, 2001).

The EHEA project continues to advance, the ministers of education meet in 2003 in Berlin, at which meeting they speak of higher education as an asset of public responsibility, whose objective in Europe» (Prague Communiqué, 2001). The creation of two working groups is crucial: the Bologna monitoring group and the preparatory group» (González López, 2019, p. 279).

The European

is to preserve Europe's cultural wealth. The guarantee of quality in higher education lies with each institution itself. The EHEA seeks transparency and educational quality at a national and institutional level(Schwartzman, 2017). And it is proposed to continue working on the following lines:

-Establishment of shared criteria in higher education, as well as shared methodologies.

-It is determined that for the year 2005 the national quality assurance systems must include:

- A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.
- Evaluation models for programs and institutions.
- Accreditation systems, certification ensure quality.
- Participation and international cooperation and an increase in mobility especially in young researchers.
- The implementation of two cycles in university studies: undergraduate and postgraduate.
- Develop a European framework of compatible and comparable qualifications.
- International curriculum through the ECTS system.
- Development of a system of scholarships for students with few or no financial possibilities, and an approach to the student and her needs.

We see that in this meeting of 2003 there is a change with respect to the previous ones, we no longer find ourselves only with declarations of intent, but with specific objectives that must be achieved, this implies the member countries and their institutions that must get to work in the set changes. These are not minor changes that involve the European Higher Education Area, but rather changes that will generate a new university system for all those Member States that are part of the EHEA (Melle-Hernández, 2018).

The ENQA also acquires a relevant role in the Bologna process, we see that the concern for insurance is increasingly evident of quality and along with it the presumption that ENQA is willing and able to assume the role of leading organization in the assurance of European educational quality (ENQA, 2010).

A new meeting of education ministers in 2005 in Bergen gives continuity to the EHEA project. In 2005, substantial progress was observed in the priority aspects defined in the previous meeting: the structure in cycles is already materializing in specific studies and quality assurance systems are beginning to take shape, creating networking between countries, progress has been made in

recognition of qualifications and periods of study, as well as in the development of national qualification frameworks compatible with the general qualifications framework of the EHEA whose general descriptors would be based on learning outcomes and competencies for each cycle (Shields, 2019).

However, deficiencies are also detected, fundamentally in the participation of students and in international cooperation. The following issues are determined as challenges and priorities to work on:

- Reinforce research and innovation, this will imply that doctoral level qualifications correspond to the global qualifications framework of the EHEA.

- Launch national qualifications frameworks that are compatible with the global qualifications framework of the EHEA.

- Apply systematic mechanisms (standards and guidelines) for quality assurance.

- Improve accessibility to higher education, avoiding socioeconomic obstacles to study.

- Improve international cooperation and expand the issuance and recognition of joint degrees, including the doctorate.

- Improve the offer of scholarships and credits to increase the mobility of students and researchers, as well as the offer of flexible learning itineraries.

In this same meeting in 2005, it was determined that the European Higher Education Area should be established by the year 2010, committing those involved in the Process to coordinate the policies of the States to encourage the achievement of the objectives of the process. Also, for the year 2010, work must be done to promote quality and transparency, as well as to achieve the necessary autonomy to implement the agreed reforms (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2020).

In 2007 a new meeting of Ministers of Education was held around the EHEA, this time in London. The work of this meeting continues to advance along the same lines as the previous meetings, great progress has already been made; the mission

is then guaranteed that higher education institutions assume:

«The preparation of students as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their professional future and training them for their personal development; the creation and preservation of an extensive base of advanced knowledge; and the promotion of research and innovation» (London, 2009).

«This meeting addresses issues such as institutional autonomy, academic freedom, the importance of equal opportunities, the need to ensure the maintenance of strong, autonomous, responsible and adequately financed higher education institutions. Education ministers believe that quality assurance agencies will be instrumental in improving confidence in higher education» (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2020, p. 90). The planned lines of action are:

- Continue promoting the mobility of students and researchers. It is considered that there are many bureaucratic difficulties for mobility, in this line, it is proposed to overcome the existing obstacles by establishing a system of scholarships and loans.

- Improve the employability of graduates.

- Intensify the collection of data on both the mobility and the employability of graduates.

- Promote flexible learning itineraries and continue working on the recognition of qualifications, generating a network of work and good practices that support it. In this sense, they undertake to launch the national qualification frameworks for the year 2010, which will have as a framework the global model of the EHEA Qualifications Framework.

- Work from higher education institutions from a lifelong learning point of view.

- Continue the lines of work in terms of educational quality. There is already a European Register of Higher Education Quality Certifying Agencies, which is a great advance.

- Improve the public information available from the EHEA to make the strategy carried out globally known.

«The higher education ministers meet again in 2009 in Leuven, Belgium. This being the last meeting of the decade, the States review the achievements made and the pending challenges that must be faced in the new decade, which are summarized in the following ten key elements» (Rodríguez Conde, 2018, p. 103):

-Social dimension: work must be done to eliminate existing barriers to access to higher education. Each country must establish the appropriate mechanisms to ensure equity in access.

-Lifelong learning: this new educational paradigm will be promoted in all institutions, which implies, in any case, providing the student with flexible learning paths in which the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning will have a decisive weight.

-Employability: higher education should adequately prepare graduates for working life. Therefore, relations between universities, employers and the government must be worked on, so that higher education institutions can meet the training needs of their students.

-Student-centered teaching: the fact of putting the student at the center of the learning process requires curricular reforms and new teaching approaches. At this point, attention should be paid to ensuring educational quality.

-Research and innovation: it would be desirable for the number of people with research skills to increase over the next decade. Therefore, it is convenient to work on the demand for research and innovation.

-International cooperation: under the belief that «the attractiveness and openness of European higher education will be highlighted through joint European actions» a key action will be to continue working on intergovernmental educational cooperation.

-Mobility: mobility is the hallmark of the European Higher Education Area, for this reason, and for all the positive elements associated with mobility, participating countries are urged to increase mobility (both teachers and students) and ensure high quality.

By 2020 at least 20% of European graduates must have had a period of study abroad.

-Collection of data: the collection of data will allow to know the evolution and carry out the supervision of the progress made.

-Transparency mechanisms: the transparency of the EHEA is linked to quality assurance systems, these are a priority in the countries and institutions involved.

-Financing of higher education: public financing will guarantee access to higher education systems, States are encouraged to seek new sources of financing.

From the Sorbonne Declaration to the 2009 Conference of Higher Education Ministers in Leuven, seven meetings have been described, as we said at the beginning, all of them decisive for the implementation of the EHEA. In this first decade, the first steps have been taken, the foundations have been laid, working groups have been created, reports have been produced and the participating countries have been urged to implement the EHEA in their institutions (Pereira Puga, 2021).

The year 2010 was the deadline that the ministers had given the countries to make the established changes. Next, we will address the most relevant issues of the EHEA for the second decade of the millennium.

2.2. The consolidation of the European Higher Education Area (2010-2020)

The first meeting of ministers of this decade takes place the same year 2010 in Budapest. It highlights achievements to date, such as European cooperation between agencies and institutions; comparability between higher education systems that favor mobility; the creation of European quality agencies and the increase in the transfer, transparency and recognition of credits (Bode and Davidson, 2018).

But it also echoes, for the first time, the complaints that have arisen in some countries derived from the implementation of the same process, which must be addressed and responded to: «we recognize and will listen to the critical voices that

have arisen among the staff and students» (Budapest, 2010).

The decade begins with difficulties in the implementation of the changes, but from this first ministerial meeting we can rescue the call, which is launched to the countries involved, to continue working for the proper functioning of the EHEA. The momentum of the Bologna process continues, and the Bologna Monitoring Group is requested to propose measures that contribute to the correct implementation of both the principles and the lines of action agreed for the EHEA in the national higher education systems and in their institutions (Bode and Davidson, 2018).

Some of the proposals are: develop complementary working methods that support the implementation of the process, carry out study visits or other types of activities that promote the exchange of information.

In 2012, the Ministers of Higher Education meet in Bucharest within the framework of the EHEA, the economic crisis that Europe is going through at the moment is beginning to have repercussions on higher education as well «the crisis is affecting the availability of adequate funds and making make the job prospects of graduates more uncertain» (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2019, p. 316). However, there is also the conviction that the solution to these economic problems is (partly) linked to education.

This being the context, the Bucharest communiqué reflects the concern to ensure greater public financing for higher education, to improve the employability of graduates, reduce youth unemployment and to consolidate the progress made so far: quality assurance, the credit system, validations, the European degree supplement, the three-cycle structure, student-centered learning and mobility systems.

For the 2012-2015 period, they will pay special attention to establishing the comprehensive implementation of the Bologna Plan in all institutions, focusing on:

-Ensure the completion of students, as well as the incorporation of innovative teaching methods that have learning outcomes as the goal of the educational process and that these, in turn, are

linked to study credits. Hand in hand with this issue we find the improvement of qualification frameworks and the employability of graduates.

-Continue working on national quality assurance systems through the agencies created for this purpose.

-Ensure a closer link with research, offering a variety of doctoral programs.

Three years later, the ministers meeting in Yerevan (Armenia) in 2015 are pleased to recognize that the EHEA is now a reality in forty-seven countries with different traditions (political, cultural and academic) that have cooperated on the basis of dialogue and have achieved shared goals through common commitments:

«By 2020 we are determined to achieve an EHEA in which our common goals are implemented in all member countries to ensure mutual trust in higher education systems, where automatic recognition of qualifications has become a reality for that students and graduates can easily move through it; where higher education is effectively contributing to the construction of inclusive societies, founded on democratic values and human rights; and where the opportunities education provide the necessary skills and aptitudes for European citizenship, innovation and employment» (Council of Ministers of Higher Education, 2015).

In this meeting in Yerevan there are four goals that are proposed to be achieved:

-Continue to improve the quality and relevance of learning and teaching.

-Promote the employability of graduates throughout their working lives, not just when they finish their studies.

-Make higher education systems increasingly inclusive given the growing diversity of countries.

-The complete and coherent implementation of the reforms agreed at the national level, as well as the commitment of the political agents involved in it.

The most recent meeting of ministers took place in 2018 in Paris, in this last meeting the progress of the Bologna process in the countries is reviewed again, observing an uneven implementation both

between policy areas and between countries. Consequently, the importance of quality assurance is insisted on, the document «Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA», it is recalled, is available to the countries to guide the reforms. In this line of quality, DEQUAR is welcomed, a database of external quality assurance reports for all EHEA countries, which will facilitate comparability, recognition, mobility, exchange and transparency (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2019).

They agree to focus, for the 2018-2020 period, on three key commitments: 1) complete the implementation of the three-cycle system compatible with ECTS and EHEA qualifications, 2) compliance with the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications related to Higher Education in the European Region and 3) comply with the provisions of the document Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015).

Also, for this period of time, work will continue on cooperation and mobility, on improving the quality of teaching and learning, focusing (as was done previously) on lifelong learning and educational innovation. Synergies in the research-education-innovation triangle will be improved. Work will be done to make better use of digital education (an issue in which it is desired to go deeper).

Another issue of enormous importance, and about which little has been said throughout the process of Bologna is teacher training, at this meeting the ministers address it in the following terms: «we will promote and support institutional, national and European initiatives for pedagogical training and continuous professional development of higher education teachers and we will explore ways for a better recognition of innovation and quality in their career» (Romero Godoy, 2018, p. 4).

The ministerial representatives of the countries participating in the EHEA were summoned for a new meeting in Italy for the year 2020, said meeting of ministers has not yet taken place due to the global pandemic situation caused by COVID-19. However, despite the suspension of the meeting, work continues on the EHEA, already in

Paris (2018) it «looked» beyond 2020 and a more ambitious EHEA was proposed, predisposed to greater interdisciplinary and cross-border cooperation, with the outstretched hand to create ties with the European Research Area and the Innovation Committee (ERAC), with the European Research Area (ERA), with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations. «We recognize that a greater effort is required to strengthen the social dimension of higher education» (Romero Godoy, 2018, p. 4).

In the Bologna process, as we have seen, the EHEA model is today a model of structured intergovernmental cooperation, a model of dialogue and networking. There was a commitment to improving education and, today, we see that the Bologna process has borne fruit.

2.3. Quality as a key element in the EHEA

It is interesting, once the historical review of the process has been carried out, to make a small analysis of the documents with which we have worked, thus, by way of quantitative analysis, we wanted to make a count of the most repeated words in the communications and declarations issued in the different meetings of ministers of higher education (Ortega, 2020).

«The Atlas.ti analysis program has been used for this, which, through the word examiner, has allowed us to recognize the most repeated words throughout these 20 years of ministerial meetings. The program allows you to eliminate linguistic elements without referential value such as prepositions, articles, etc., it also allows you to filter words that you do not want to consider in the analysis» (Ortega, 2020, p. 53).

Recognizing the most repeated words can add value, since the importance of words is undeniable in any discipline linked to the social sciences, and it can be deduced that the number of times certain words appear is proportional to their importance within the process (Hernandez, 2015). In this same sense, Colella and Díaz-Salazar (2014) state that it is from the phrases that we give meaning to the discourse.

«It is also logical to find the terms «student/s» among these, since they are the ones who will

experience the transformations derived from the Process, or «learning» since, clearly, the trend will impact the learning processes of the students, now incorporating the called «learning outcomes» that will be an essential component in the teaching-learning processes, all contributing to a paradigm shift in favor of student-centered teaching and learning» (ESG, 2015).

The term «quality», meanwhile, is added to this list of words most often repeated in ministerial declarations and communications. This is a reflection of the concern for quality issues in the higher education institutions of the EHEA countries.

In all the ministerial meetings, the issue of quality appears both directly and indirectly, given that «the aspiration to improve the quality of the tertiary education offer throughout the European Higher Education Area is a key element within the Process Bologna» (European Commission, 2015, p. 89). Educational quality is an issue that has aroused great interest in the academic field as it is a subject of enormous complexity, of great depth and that generates controversies about its meaning, its measurement and its implementation. Numerous authors have tried to elucidate its concept and its scope, concluding that it is almost a political-philosophical issue in which various conceptions can be identified (Egido and Haug, 2016; Cascante Fernández, 2019; Muñoz-Repiso and Murillo, 2020; López Aguado, 2018; Álvarez-López and Matarranz, 2020).

In the document called Criteria and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) prepared in 2015; presented jointly by the seven interest groups that make up the European Space for Higher Education (EHEA): EUA, EURASHE, ESU, ENQA, Business Europe, Education International and EQAR; and approved by the conference of ministers, quality is proposed in the following terms:

«Higher education has multiple purposes, including preparing students for active citizenship, preparing students for future careers (for example, contributing to their employability), assisting in their personal development, creating a broad base of advanced knowledge and fostering research and

innovation. Therefore, interest groups, who may prioritize different goals, may view the quality of higher education differently, and therefore quality assurance needs to take different viewpoints into account. Quality, although not easy to define, is mainly the result of the interaction between teachers, students and the institutional learning environment.

Quality assurance must ensure a learning environment in which program content, learning opportunities, and resources match their fines. » (2015, pp. 8-9). As we can see, quality in the EHEA is considered as an element of responsibility and improvement for higher education, that is, to give confidence to teachers, students and staff about the training offered by institutions and to carry out monitoring and improvement actions that optimize training processes.

3. Quality as the unequivocal seal of the EHEA

Having gone through the most relevant milestones of the Bologna process, we can go one step further and recognize that one of the most significant elements in the EHEA is the implementation of mechanisms to guarantee quality in higher education in the participant countries. As we saw in the previous section, quality has been one of the most repeated elements in the ministerial meetings, showing the decisive importance that it has in the EHEA.

Twenty years have passed since the first meeting that originated the Bologna process and, since then, the discourse on educational quality has gained a lot of strength, in this line Fernández-González and Monarca (2018) underline the centrality of quality in the discourses educational policy; Colella and Díaz-Salazar (2014, p. 299) also agree that «the discourse of quality dominates the excess of meaning that the discursiveness of education implies, turning this partial fixation of meaning into the legitimate -and normative- mode of being-education in the present». Educational quality has become the focus of educational policies, not only in the context of the EHEA but as a global trend, in fact, objective 4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development consists of

«guaranteeing an education inclusive and equitable quality program and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all» (UNESCO, 2015, p. 5).

The quality mechanisms that have been launched in the EHEA have been various and have had a great impact on university institutions. In this same line, the quality agency ANECA (2018, p. 7) states that: «the policies, instruments and processes that, in relation to the guarantee of university quality, put into operation by governments, universities and evaluation agencies, they are at the service of the objectives given to university education in general frameworks such as those proposed from forums such as the European Education Area Superior - EHEA-».

4. Debates on quality in the European University

The focus on quality in higher education institutions represents a radical change in strategy, which is generating different debates, not only in Spain but also in the European Union as a whole. In particular, we will collect below three of them: «homogeneity versus diversity of university models; the controversy of the «university ranking»; and the applicability of total quality management systems in the field of higher education.

The first two debates, related to the configuration of higher education systems and their assessment, were analyzed by Teichler (2020), who addressed the issue based on the following arguments. On the one hand, the discussion between experts, about the virtues derived from a shared or differentiated quality between institutions. The question is, to what extent a homogeneity or a differentiation in quality is possible or even desirable.

In this regard, specialized research in higher education would try to resolve the conflict between «...quality and quantity, and the tendencies of higher education actors to imitate and copy the most successful models...» (Teichler, 2020, p. 14). For this author, quality would be part of a larger discourse, whose fundamental magnitudes would be «growth» and «diversity» of

higher education systems. In a context of expansion of higher education and focusing on the EHEA (resulting from the so-called Bologna Process), it is discussed how to ensure «...a certain gold standard of quality...» compatible with the existing conviction, of the convenience of a balance between diversity and stratification in higher education systems.

The second debate would deal with the comparative criteria between the different models of higher education. Question that links with the previous one, since the EHEA speaks of harmonization, yes, but respecting the uniqueness of each university; defense of a diversity, which as such, makes it difficult to carry out comparisons between higher education institutions.

In addition to the two previous debates, it is also convenient to analyze a third one: the supposed unnecessary character, incompatibility or even infeasibility of total quality models or systems with pedagogical models in the field of higher education. We will approach it in a scheduled way, dividing it into three parts. In the first, the arguments of being unnecessary or even incompatible management systems with quality models in university teaching based on pedagogy will be examined.

In the second, within the framework of the EHEA, the demand for development appears, by their universities, internal quality assurance systems. In addition to its description, we will see to what extent this requirement implies a recognition of the importance of customer orientation, as an organizational principle. Finally, and in the same line of work, we will dedicate a section to the analysis of total quality systems as paradigms of customer orientation in university management.

Therefore, there are three issues addressed: homogeneity versus diversity, comparative criteria between the different models of higher education (focusing the question on university rankings) and total quality management systems applied in higher education. As a whole and in summary, it is a triple debate on the configuration, assessment and management of quality higher education systems, which in this work we will examine particularly from the

paradigm of orientation towards the main client of higher education, the student.

For this, the concepts of convergence, diversity, differentiation and university collaboration will be discussed; linking with the -open- doubt about to what context and to what public does one allude, when speaking of a quality university education; the question is completed, with the application of the also controversial comparison tables between universities or university rankings.

Subsequently, it will be assessed how total quality systems in higher education have focused mainly on the administrative and management part, and the difficulties that are being encountered for their development in the university. In this context and within the framework of the EHEA, together with the total quality systems applied to the field of higher education, arises the demand for the development, by its universities, of internal quality assurance systems, translation of the «European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)» or «Criteria and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA». The following sections will be devoted to this -we understand it to be interesting- analysis.

5. Between homogeneity and diversity

The Bologna Declaration of June 19, 1999, which gave the official start to the construction process of the so-called European Higher Education Area (EHEA), has led to the creation of a convergent structure of study programs and higher education degrees in Europe, which facilitates both student mobility -and ultimately, that of its graduates in the European labor market-, as well as the international competitiveness of its higher education institutions. An explicit double objective (Declaration of Bologna, 1999; Convention of European Higher Education Institutions, 2001) and certainly ambivalent (Teichler, 2020, p. 140), which is summarized in: homogeneity and differentiation.

Without a certain degree of homogeneity of programs and qualifications between institutions at the European level ("intra-institutional" homogeneity), that is, without the student appreciating few qualitative and curricular

differences in them, mobility does not seem to be - a priori - viable. Although the success of the Erasmus programme, for «intra-European» mobility, would make this statement questionable; and perhaps the importance of the stratification of the programs (in degrees and postgraduates) and/or of the institutions themselves has been exaggerated (Teichler, 2020, p. 177). Another issue would be, in this regard, in terms of mobility «extra-European» (Wende, 2019), where the trend is clearly upward (Teichler, 2020, p. 179).

At the same time, the institutions will try to differentiate themselves in quality, to increase their international competitiveness. Quality, as a foundation or «...essential condition for the trust, relevance, mobility, compatibility and attractiveness of the EHEA» (Muñoz Cantero, Quality Assurance Systems: A European Directive, 2019, p. 125), which was already referred to in the same Bologna Declaration (1999) that gave rise to it (and which was previously analyzed in section «2.1.8. Compete in quality, a solution to strengthen the attractiveness of European universities.» of the work).

Therefore, the framework in which the European university must position itself, within an international context, must be one of competition, but also of collaboration (Michavila, 2020). Preserving their identity, European educational institutions must bet on collaboration in order to compete. They must seek to take advantage of the advantages derived from a harmonization of educational systems, which should facilitate collaboration between the different higher education institutions of the EHEA. In short, convergence, differentiation and collaboration, respecting the diversity and uniqueness of each university institution.

The various trends «...indicate that the current dynamics in European higher education are characterized both by the convergence, with the aim of harmonization; and divergence, in a search for greater diversification» (van der Wende, 2018, p. 53). Synthesizing and although it may sound certainly paradoxical, «integration» of a diversity of educational models college students; this seems to be the maximum. Or in other words, shared quality yes, but that does not prevent

differentiation. This is the balance that the EHEA is committed to. A complex goal, no doubt.

And this is where the second mentioned debate opens: the comparison between European higher education institutions, taking into account their diversity. Can they be compared? And if so, how? With what tool or tools? Issues that will be discussed below, addressing -for this- the problem of global or international university rankings. Together with the European response, to the existence of such rankings and the associated global competition.

The establishment of common quality assurance standards at the international level would facilitate comparability between the different educational systems (Bernhard, 2021, p. 22) and therefore of their institutions. In this sense, the EHEA has provided itself with two instruments, a set of «Criteria and guidelines for the guarantee of quality in the EHEA» («European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)») and the «European Register of Higher Education Quality Agencies» («European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR)»); that together with the global international rankings (special mention to the U-Multirank, recently created and promoted by the European Commission itself), should provide the necessary common framework of reference that facilitates a comparison, of interest to the different agents or stakeholders of the educational system: from the quality assurance agencies, to the HEIs themselves, going through teachers or students. In the latter case, in view of the student's choice of university.

Now, the question is to what extent all these instruments fulfill the function of a reference framework on the quality of education offered by higher education institutions, within the EHEA. And in particular, to what extent would they do so in the face of its main perceiver, the student. Like any other user of a service, in this case of an educational service, the student will want to have information that makes it easier for him to choose a center or specific studies, based on his own interests.

Interests that, on the other hand, will probably be different -or at least not necessarily concordant- with those of the rest of the agents of the university

(professors, administrators, society as a whole, etc.). Starting with the global university rankings, we will try to address this issue in the following sections.

6. Conclusions

Next, some reflections are proposed as a closure derived from the path carried out throughout this work. We began by reviewing the history of the EHEA with its respective ministerial meetings and the small advances that have allowed its configuration. We have subsequently delved into the quality of education from the perspective proposed in the EHEA.

First of all, it should be recognized that the Bologna process, and specifically the EHEA, is a unique project and an example of intergovernmental cooperation. The Bologna Process has been, seen in perspective, a success and has shown that it is possible to work cooperatively based on respect and dialogue. Major changes have taken place in the education systems of the member countries and, although the EHEA obviously still has room for improvement, the changes it has generated in higher education can be considered clearly positive.

The work maintained over time through the ministerial meetings, the working groups that have been created and all the agents involved in the member countries have allowed the creation of these mechanism transformers of higher education, causing the university system to have changed decisively in recent years and more significantly in the last decade. The EHEA is also a clear example of a Supranational Educational Policy, being, as we have seen, an educational policy that, born within the European Union as an institution, becomes a world trend and that modifies educational policies (of higher education in this case) of the nations, generating common and harmonized educational policies. In this case, in addition to going beyond national barriers, it has gone beyond the very institution of the European Union, given that today there are already forty-eight countries that are part of the EHEA, fully participating in it.

The quality model that has been proposed in the EHEA has had an undeniable political impact on the countries. The perspective of quality in the EHEA is only one of the many that exist. Laclau (2016) already stated that quality is a concept that depends absolutely on the interpretation that one wants to give it. In our case, we have seen that educational quality has involved the creation of common criteria for the countries, as well as the implementation of external evaluations.

In light of the study carried out, it is evident that accountability is here to stay and, in this sense, the educational quality model that has been imposed through established procedures seems to be bearing positive fruit and that, in to a greater or lesser extent, it is working properly in all the EHEA countries. Most of the countries have implemented compulsory accreditation processes both in their higher education institutions and in their official educational programs that ensure the quality of higher education, this harmonization never seen before is a good example of the determining role that quality has had in the Bologna Process.

The growing number of quality agencies and the growing number of accreditation reports that have been issued (evaluating educational institutions and programs) is a clear indicator that the culture of quality has had a strong impact on countries and higher education institutions. It is to be hoped that in the not-too-distant future the obligation of external evaluations will be extended to other elements and/or agents that are part of the higher education chain.

Finally, as a line of future work, the evaluation of the quality processes implemented up to now is proposed, we could call it the meta-evaluation of quality assurance systems. The phenomenon of quality is a phenomenon which is here to stay, as we saw earlier, and probably still needs to go a long way to improve some of its procedures.

Along with the benefits derived from the EHEA seal of quality, it is also important to recognize the dangers associated with excessive concern for quality assurance, since we run the risk of paying more attention to quality processes than to quality itself, to external evaluations and their reports, than to the educational reality; to the impact

indices of the publications, than to their content; to the hours of teaching or to the results of the surveys than to the teaching-learning process itself. There is no doubt that quality assurance processes are a valuable tool that seek to improve higher education, but it is necessary that we periodically review these quality models, that we remember that education is at the center of all these processes and that therefore quality mechanisms and tools must always be at the service of education.

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