

# Worldviews and Quality in Higher Education: a dichotomy between productivity and social responsibility

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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses and analyzes concepts that have been often used by important stakeholders to refer to challenges and to quality in higher education. The aim is to identify the conceptualizations of quality in higher education that underlie the use of different concepts such as efficiency and equity. Based on publications by important multilateral organizations, these terms are correlated with the conceptualizations of higher education and, at the political level, with two major contemporary socioeconomic models: neoliberalism and social welfare state. Finally, two ideological tendencies for the understanding of quality in higher education are presented: quality as productivity and quality as social responsibility.

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## 1. Introduction

Very likely, “quality” has been one of the most widely used words in papers and studies on higher education in the past decades. The focus on quality was preceded by quantitative requirements. The heyday of quantitative solutions regarding education occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, which were characterized, in many countries, by larger expenditures with education, increase in the number of years of compulsory education, reduction of the age required for school admission and in the development of economic hypotheses about education, such as the famous “human capital theory” to explain economic growth. Only in the early 1980s did the first questions about quality of education arise, and at the end of that decade, the issue had become a priority in North America and in Europe.

As higher education has recently faced “hostile” problems and challenges, such as limited public financing, massification of the educational system, establishment of competitive markets in higher education, etc. (Teixeira *et al.*, 2004), there has been a favorable environment to the development and creation of quality programs of higher education. In the past decades, many governments have devised and expanded national systems for evaluation and accreditation of institutions and programs; economic blocs have set up international agencies for quality assurance; multilateral organizations have published studies on the issue and, more recently, several university rankings have been disclosed. In this context, the term “quality in higher education” has taken added importance. But what does quality in higher education mean? What does quality mean to different higher education stakeholders?

Therefore, numerous definitions of quality in higher education began to emerge in the 1980s. At that time, quality was determined by the extent to which a previous set of goals was met, such as fitness for purpose and value added (Watty, 2005). However, the major propositions for the categorization of the different ways of interpreting quality in higher education were made in the 1990s. In 1993, Lee Harvey and Diana Green (1993) published the most widely known proposition for the categorization of quality in the paper entitled *Defining Quality* which, for some authors, consisted of a rigorous attempt to clarify how several stakeholders interpret quality.

Notwithstanding this endeavor, the interpretation of quality in higher education is still a matter of debate. Quite recently, some terms have been frequently used to refer to educational system quality, institutions, and programs. Probably, this is due to the larger participation of stakeholders and international organizations in evaluation, accreditation, and quality assurance. Hence, the aim of the present study is to identify the origins and tendencies of conceptualizations of quality in higher education that underlie the use of different concepts, such as efficiency and equity. Based on documents published by important

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international stakeholders, the terms utilized in the publications are related to conceptualizations of higher education and, at the political level, to two major contemporary socioeconomic models, namely neoliberalism and the social welfare state. Finally, two ideological tendencies for the understanding of quality in higher education are introduced: quality as productivity<sup>[1]</sup> and quality as social responsibility<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2. Method and worldviews

Much has already been written and published about the meaning of quality in higher education, but the following ideas should be highlighted. Among these ideas, special attention should be given to the definition of quality as fitness for purpose – and the statement of Ronald Barnett (1992) that having a consistent opinion about quality in higher education requires some reasonable idea of higher education. For him, in modern times, owing to the diversity of views of democratic societies, there is not a single conception, but several different conceptions.

With the aim of identifying the tendencies towards the understanding of quality in higher education which emerge from the most widely used terms recently employed by important stakeholders in the international scenario, as well as their political origins, this paper makes some essential considerations. Consequently, the method of analysis combines the identification of opinions about the designations of missions and functions for higher education (its purposes) and the understanding that these goals derive directly from the conceptualization of higher education stakeholders have. In this respect, it should be remarked that, just as the concept of quality depends on the conceptualization of higher education, the understanding of higher education derives directly from the conceptualization of society, of economics and of politics, i.e., from the worldview of those who express their opinions about the issue. Therefore, the understanding of quality in higher education relies ultimately on the stakeholder's worldview.

This way, publications and documents available from multilateral organizations, especially from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), from the European Commission and from the World Bank are assessed to detect the tendencies of the interpretations of quality and their political origins expressed by the new terms and concepts. These publications are used as reference to correlate terms such as efficiency and equity with conceptualizations of higher education and, at the political level, with two major contemporary socioeconomic models: neoliberalism and the social welfare state (Beck *et al.*, 2001; Stiglitz, 2002; Santos, 2005). Thus, these socioeconomic models are analyzed through a dichotomous approach and serve as basis to correlate the terms with the conceptualizations of higher education and these conceptualizations with the understanding of quality in higher education. Although there are hybrid models that rely on the correlations of political forces, with characteristics of neoliberalism and of social welfare simultaneously, taking into account the aim of this paper if both models are regarded to be ideal.

For the sake of this analysis, neoliberalism is understood as the economic system model originated from the schools of classical and neoclassical economics. Classical economics postulated perfect competition in all markets and that the State should not interfere in market operation, because economic agents in their individual actions, as if guided by an invisible hand, target equilibrium and efficiency, i.e., *laissez faire* <sup>[3]</sup>. In the last decades of the 20th century, neoliberalism designated the economic doctrine that defends total market freedom, large restriction on economic interventions by the State and the basis of the so-called Washington Consensus<sup>[4]</sup>. Among the major advocates of neoliberalism are Friedrich August von Hayek, from the Austrian School of Economics, and Milton Friedman, from the Chicago School. For many authors, the recent world economic crises - 2009 and 2011 – are closely related to financial market deregulation and to the excess freedom governments have provided markets with.

On the other hand, the social welfare state is regarded as a type of political and economic organization in which the State is the agent of social promotion and the organizer of the economy. In this view, the State is the regulating agent of the country's whole social and health, political and economic life in a partnership with unions and private companies. Education, for example, is understood as a right and duty of the State. One of the economic pillars of the social welfare model is the Keynesian theory consolidated by John Maynard Keynes. Contrary to neoliberalism, this theory postulates that the State is an indispensable agent for control of the economy with the aim of implementing a system of full employment. The Keynesian theory

gave the State the right and duty to grant social benefits that guarantee that the population will have a minimum standard of living, including minimum wage, unemployment insurance and free medical care.

### **3. Conceptualizations and terms associated with market view and neoliberalism**

A stakeholder with a conceptualization of higher education consistent with a neoliberal worldview defends, in principle, that education is a commercial good instead of a public good. In this view, the supply of higher education is the duty of private institutions, companies that set up competitive markets, releasing the State from the obligation of providing young people and adults with free education.

In *The Financing and Management of Higher Education – a status report on worldwide reforms* published in 1998, the World Bank advocated the assumption that higher education is a private and not a public good by stating that it meets many of the conditions pointed out by Nicholas Barr as characteristics of a private good:

The reform agenda of the 90s, and almost certainly extending well into the next century, is oriented to the market rather than to public ownership or to governmental planning and regulation. Underlying the market orientation of tertiary education is the ascendance, almost worldwide, of market capitalism and the principles of neo-liberal economics.

Higher education meets many of the conditions identified by Barr as characteristic of a private good, amenable to the forces of the market. First, higher education can not be treated as a purely public good. That is because it exhibits conditions of rivalness (limited supply), excludability (often available for a price), and, rejection (not demanded by all) -- all of which do not meet the characteristics of a purely public good, but reflect at least some important conditions of a private good. Second, the consumers of higher education are reasonably well informed and the providers are often ill informed--conditions which are ideal for market forces to operate. This market orientation has led to elements of the reform agenda such as tuition, which shifts some of the higher education cost burden from taxpayers to parents and students, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of higher education, more nearly full cost fees for institutionally-provided room and board, and more nearly market rates of interest on student loans, all of which rely upon market choices to signal worth and true trade-offs. (World Bank, 1998, p. 3).

Besides the means, the neoliberal view on higher education also prioritizes the private sector and economic growth for the allocation of purposes (mission and functions) of higher education. Following this logic, educational services are naturally oriented towards economic demands and towards human capital formation, specifically towards the labor market. With respect to management, the aim of the institutions is to act as efficiently and efficaciously as possible so that their goals are achieved with the lowest cost and as quickly as possible. Therefore, this is a predominantly utilitarian view, which refers to a perspective of higher education that is mainly instrumental and productivist.

The World Bank, in a comprehensive document on tertiary education<sup>[5]</sup>, *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*, published in 2002, turns to Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington to describe the functions of higher education:

Tertiary education institutions have a critical role in supporting knowledge-driven economic growth strategies and the construction of democratic, socially cohesive societies. Tertiary education assists the improvement of the institutional regime through the training of competent and responsible professionals needed for sound macroeconomic and public sector management. Its academic and research activities provide crucial support for the national innovation system. (World Bank, 2002, p. 23).

In this document, although the Bank describes the problems concerning the relationship between higher education and society, it highlights the preoccupation with its contribution to the development and growth of the economy and professional qualification.

Likewise, OECD, in *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society*, published in 2008, even though it mentions the need to improve dissemination of knowledge for society's benefit, states that it is imperative that countries increase their higher capacity for employment and maintain a competitive research base at the global level. Among recommendations for member countries, OECD points out the necessity to develop policies that strengthen the relationship between higher education and the labor market and that maintain the external assessment systems and guarantee the contribution of national systems to the economic goals

of the member countries. In almost the entire OECD document, economic goals are given larger attention than the social functions of higher education. (OECD, 2008).

With regard to quality, OECD, in *Quality and Internationalisation in Higher Education*, published in 1999, clearly demonstrates the relationship between prioritization of market-oriented higher education and a quality-based approach with the aim of meeting the demands for employability.

With the increased [public] funds [for higher education] comes an increased concern on the part of government to be reassured on three counts. Firstly, are the higher education institutions explicitly planning and organising to produce the graduates required by society, *i.e.* are their objectives appropriate? Secondly, is the money being spent well, *i.e.* are the higher education institutions operating efficiently? Thirdly, are the higher education institutions producing the desired graduates, *i.e.* are they operating effectively?

These concerns have led to new interpretations of the concept of quality.  
(OECD, 1999, p. 29).

“Efficiency” is one of the terms most widely used by those who prioritize market-oriented higher education. In times of fiscal difficulties and cost containment in public services, “efficiency” has become a sort of basic requirement for several areas of public administration, as well as for a significant share of society when it comes to the use of taxes and State resources. For Leon Estrada (1999), “efficiency,” in the context of quality in higher education, belongs to the explanatory/relational dimension of quality and means the relationship between the invested resources and the fulfillment of functions. According to Antonio Fazendeiro (2002), in order for education to be one of quality, it has to possess the desirable and observable attributes in the efficiency dimension and to show efficacy in resource management, which implies excellence in governance.

Another discussion which is consistent with the view that the main function of higher education is related to the economy and the market is the so-called total quality management (TQM). TQM, even though it is not directly mentioned by international organizations, has been the subject of several academic studies on quality in higher education. A significant share of the extant literature on quality in education stems from the management perspective: quality control, auditing and valuation, which involve total quality models, such as Balanced Scorecard and TQM. However, the application of philosophy and TQM theories to the educational sector has not been very successful (Santiago, 1999). Numerous authors have warned that productivist views and assessment of higher education developed according to an economic view can uncritically apply procedures that are specific to economic control to educational processes and to those of scientific production, with negative implications.

#### **4. The conceptualizations and terms related to the social welfare state**

A view of higher education consonant with the social welfare state model implies education as a “public good”. Public good, in economics, refers to a good to which all individuals have access, therefore, it is non-exclusive and non-rival. Public good is not necessarily supplied by the State, but governmental intervention is crucial to increase the welfare of the population. In the perspective of education as a public good, the State should provide young people and adults with free and good quality education, that is, the means used for provision of education are mainly the duty of governments. In the social welfare state model, aside from health and social assistance, the State must provide the population with education. In the final document of the 2009 world conference, *The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development*, when addressing social responsibility, UNESCO reinforces “Higher Education as a public good is the responsibility of all stakeholders, especially governments” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 1), *i.e.*, in this case, the multilateral organization concurs with the view of education of social welfare state.

The view on higher education with the chief end and mission to promote the development of several social, cultural and economic aspects of countries and societies originates from the historical trajectory of universities in the 19th and 20th centuries and its relationship with States and communities. In this perspective, the functions of the higher education systems associated with cultural, social and democratic development are more/as relevant as those related to economic growth and labor market expansion.

In the 1998 world conference, *Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action*, UNESCO emphasizes the social and human role of higher education, stressing that

[...] higher education should aim at the creation of a new society - non-violent and non-exploitative - consisting of highly cultivated, motivated and integrated individuals, inspired by love for humanity and guided by wisdom (UNESCO, 1998, p. 24).

Likewise, the 2009 UNESCO world conference underlines the importance of higher education as the major force for the construction of inclusive societies and with diversified knowledge. The introduction of the final communiqué draws attention to the recent evidence that research and higher education contribute to the eradication of poverty, to sustainable development and to progress, allowing the fulfillment of international objectives outlined in the Millennium Development Goals and in Education for All. Among the main topics of the 2009 conference are the social relevance of higher education, access, equality and quality and higher education in Africa, the continent with the largest needs in the whole world (UNESCO, 2009).

In addressing social responsibility in the final communiqué of the 2009 conference, UNESCO affirms that higher education is responsible for furthering knowledge about multifaceted issues in the cultural, scientific, economic, and social domains. In this respect, global challenges, such as climate changes, renewable energy sources, intercultural dialogue, food safety, sustainable development, peace, well-being and respect for human rights are some of the issues to be dealt with through the social responsibility of higher education. Therefore, in both documents, of the 1998 and 2009 conferences, UNESCO, in addition to mentioning the economic functions of higher education, unequivocally distinguishes the role for of social responsibility as priority mission for higher education systems.

“Equity” is another term that can be associated with the vision that the major function of higher education is related to social and welfare issues. According to the document *Estándares en educación: conceptos fundamentales* [Educational Standards: basic concepts], released by UNESCO’s Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (1997), equity is probably the main problem with public educational policies nowadays. For Mercedes G. García, equity, as one of the domains of educational systems, means

allowing all students, regardless of their origins and status (personal, family, or social), to have equal opportunities, processes and results. It centers around homogeneous results across all geographical and social areas of a country or where there are differences in educational access or process (as occurs with gender) to assure compensation for the differences or equal opportunities (2000, p. 240).

In the 1998 and 2009 conference documents, UNESCO addresses the challenge of equity. In the conference held at the end of the past century, all items of article 3 deal with equity of access and, although the text restates that admission should be based on personal merit, it highlights that, given previously acquired skills, “no discrimination can be accepted in granting access to higher education on grounds of race, gender, language or religion, or economic, cultural or social distinctions, or physical disabilities.” (UNESCO, 1998, p.22).

Besides UNESCO, other world-renowned organizations, especially in Europe, also emphasize the social function of higher education. In the Lisbon Declaration, the Association of European Universities (2007) states that Europe expects universities to expand their role and to help society cope with the challenges of the 21st century. Among these challenges, the association cites climate changes, energy problems, increase in longevity, quick evolution of technologies, socioeconomic interdependence on a global scale, and the growing economic inequalities in Europe and between Europe and other continents.

Likewise, in *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area*, the ENQA (2005), from the European Commission, reinforces guidelines such as protection of the interests of society and of the development of the quality process that allows demonstrating the social responsibility of institutions. The ENQA also strongly recommends that institutions have their internal assessment processes which allow a different look, according to the specificity and demands of each community.

Specifically with respect to the concept of quality, there are also texts that link higher education to the fulfillment of several specific demands of each context. In *Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action*, UNESCO points out the need to avoid uniformities and defines quality in higher education in a broad way:

It is a multidimensional concept, which should embrace all its functions, and activities: teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, equipment, services to the community and the academic environment. Internal self-evaluation and external review, conducted openly by independent specialists, if possible with international expertise, are vital for enhancing quality. Independent national bodies should be established and comparative standards of quality, recognized at international level, should be defined. Due attention should be paid to specific institutional, national and regional contexts in order to take into account diversity and to avoid uniformity. Stakeholders should be an integral part of the institutional evaluation process (UNESCO, 1998, p. 25).

For UNESCO (1998), the quality of institutions should be assessed

in terms of the fit between what society expects of institutions and what they do. This requires ethical standards, political impartiality, critical capacities and, at the same time, a better articulation with the problems of society and the world of work, basing long-term orientations on societal aims and needs, including respect for cultures and environmental protection. (UNESCO, 1998, p. 23).

In brief, in a worldview context related to the social welfare state, the conceptualization and quality of higher education are associated mainly with the fulfillment of social needs, considering long-term social, cultural and environmental issues, which should take place predominantly with accountability of the State for education.

### 5. Quality as productivity or social responsibility

The analysis allows stating that despite the attempt to show the diversity of interpretations of higher education, important multilateral organizations such as UNESCO, the European Commission, OECD and the World Bank, express and summarize different views on higher education missions and, consequently, of the conceptualization of quality in higher education (Table 1). On the one hand, the World Bank and OECD prioritize economic and market demands for higher education and disseminate terms originated from the industry and private sector such as efficiency and productivity. On the other hand, UNESCO and the European Commission express views on higher education that broaden the scope of the mission to social aspects, requiring conformance to the specificities of each context, the respect for the existing differences and the need for equity of systems.

Table 1 – Worldviews and conceptualizations of quality in higher education

Worldview	Priority purposes for higher education	Stakeholders	Related terms	Conceptualization of quality
Economic view Related to neoliberalism	Emphasis on strengthening of economic growth and of market demands	World Bank OECD	-Efficiency and efficacy -Total quality -External assessment -Education as commercial service	Quality as productivity
Social view related to social welfare state	Emphasis on contribution to social, human, cultural and environmental development	UNESCO ENQA	-Equity -Multidiversity -Self-assessment -Education as public good	Quality as social responsibility

Source: Table built by the author based on UNESCO, OECD, World Bank and ENQA.

The understanding of the nature of higher education as public good by some of these important organizations, such as UNESCO, or as commercial service, by the World Bank, also reveals the worldviews on society, economy, and politics which underlie the conceptualizations of higher education and of quality. Therefore, it is possible to say that there is a strong tendency today to reproduce the existing dichotomy of the worldviews on quality in higher education in a broader context: (i) quality based on neoliberalism, which can be summarized by the term “productivity” given that the function of higher education is its priority contribution to economic development, to market growth and to larger human capital endowment or (ii) quality based on the social welfare state model, which can be summarized by the term “social responsibility” given that higher education fulfills its role when it primarily contributes to social, human, cultural and environmental development, with equity and emphasis on local needs.

## 6. Conclusion

The views on education have varied historically, supporting the idea of Émile Durkheim that education is a socialization process that integrates individuals in the social context and, consequently, varies according to time and environment. The term “quality,” which derives from the Latin word *qualis*, meaning of what kind, of what class, of what nature, of what character etc., in the educational domain, also has varied according to time and environment. More specifically, in the domain of higher education, “quality” has been used injudiciously to refer to many things. In the early 1990s, Vroeijenstijn (1992) said that “trying to define quality is a waste of time”, based on the argument that it is a relative concept and that different stakeholders in higher education have different priorities, whose focus of attention probably varies.

In the literature of the past two decades, it is widely reported that quality in education and, more specifically, in higher education, does not have a single meaning (UNESCO, 2003). Therefore, it is perfectly possible that quality in higher education has a meaning for a given group and different meanings for other groups.

When analyzed in the social, economic, and political perspective, the conceptualizations of quality in higher education tend to mirror the worldview of the stakeholders. Thus, this paper demonstrated that the worldview is a determining factor for the embodiment of the conceptualization of higher education and, consequently, of the interpretation of quality in higher education. Nowadays, given the existence of two socioeconomic organization models based on different levels of market and State participation, namely neoliberalism and social welfare state, the groups of interest base their conceptualizations of quality on these models. The stakeholders who are concerned mainly with the market, employability and competitiveness tend to interpret quality as productivity, in which goals are chiefly targeted at economic growth. The stakeholders who see eye to eye with the social welfare model tend to understand quality as social responsibility, in which the ends are broader and prioritize different social issues, such as human, cultural and environmental development.

## Notes

[1] Productivity, in economic terms, is associated with the idea of scientifically minimizing the use of material resources, labor force, machinery, equipment, etc., in order to cut down production costs, expand markets, increase the number of employees, etc.

[2] The term “social responsibility” emerged in the early 20th century, but it was not well received as it was said to have a socialist content. Only in the 1950s, in the United States, with the publication of *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*, by Howard Bowen, was the topic brought into the limelight and became mainstream. Currently, the term is understood in different ways. A widely accepted definition is that “social responsibility” is an ethical theory or ideology which posits that a governmental, corporate, organizational or individual entity must benefit the society at large.

[3] *laissez faire* means *let do, let go, let pass*, and refers to total freedom in the economy: free market, free manufacture, low taxes or no taxes, free labor market and minimum governmental intervention.

[4] Recommendations initially made by the IMF and the World Bank so that Latin American countries could adjust their economies with fiscal discipline, tax reform, trade liberalization, privatization of State corporations, exchange rate and market interest rates, among others.

[5] The World Bank’s *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education* uses the concept from OECD for “tertiary education”: “a level or stage of studies beyond secondary education which can lead to a qualification recognised on the labour market. It is undertaken in formal tertiary education institutions -- universities, polytechnics, colleges; public and private -- but also in a wide variety of other settings including secondary schools, at work sites, via free-standing information technology-based offerings and a host of private and public entities.”

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