UNIREGOV PROJECT:
A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Introduction

Under what conditions has the governance of Higher Education (HE) changed in recent times? Have public policies contributed significantly to this change? These questions involve a number of expectations about the transformation of different systems of governance in the field of HE that have occurred across the world in the last twenty years, during the age of globalization. On the one hand, there is a general tendency towards the globalization of quality regulation in the field of Higher Education (HE), with a proliferation of quality assurance agencies (QAAs) overall, either of a public or private nature. On the other hand, there is also a trend, as evidenced by many stakeholders, to care about the performance of learning activities provided by universities, where both local and international students look for the perfect fit of their learning goals.

The delivery of high quality educative services has become an imperative in an increasingly competitive environment, with a large increase of international student mobility in many countries, and the internalization of many universities leading to a more diverse faculty, and multiple international connections. International education markets and networks are now very vibrant, showing a multipolar nature involving institutions from all continents. The expansion of regulatory governance, with its toolbox of new policy instruments, has become an answer to the demands for a better HE, but also a driver for change in most HE systems in the world. Here we are interested in understanding these processes, and, in particular, how countries have adapted and integrated such tendencies in their domestic systems of governance.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to establish a conceptual framework for the project Regulatory Governance in Higher Education: a Comparative Analysis of Instruments, Agencies, and Audiences (UNIREGOV). The project UNIREGOV aims to provide an answer to the aforementioned questions about the governance of Higher Education (HE) and the role of public policy, by pursuing a comparative analysis of regulatory governance in higher education, particularly quality assurance of universities.

To answer these questions, the data collection process will proceed in two phases. At an initial stage, a global database of agencies will be created, gathering significant information about the institutional and organizational characteristics of the current universe of QAAs worldwide. At a second stage, the research will turn to the realization of six in-depth case studies (Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Spain, and the United Kingdom (UK)). These case studies will focus on mapping the main actors involved in quality assurance (QAA, public and private HEIs, government officials, etc.) and analyzing their internal policy dynamics, their use of regulatory instruments, and the global and international context within which they operate in each case. Apart from conducting a

literature review for all cases, the data collection will be complemented with an online survey directed to the quality assurance units of HEIs.

To guide the data collection process, this paper will expose the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of this project. With that purpose, the paper is organized in four parts. First, the theoretical framework introduces some key definitions, approaching the issue of quality assurance of HEIs from a regulatory governance perspective. Second, to focus the scope of the project, its main research goals are presented and discussed. Third, with the aim of guiding the data collection process and the analysis, a specific set of research hypotheses are formulated. And, fourth, the methodology of the project as well as the main phases of the data collection process are briefly explained.

1. Theoretical framework

Regulatory governance of higher education

Public policies in the field of higher education are rapidly transforming in numerous countries, and the process of shifting public policies regarding universities has attracted the attention of many scholars in the field of higher education governance (Neave, 1998; Kogan & Hanney, 2000; Dill, 2003). The rise in the regulatory capacities of states across the various domains of public intervention, a trend that has been conceptualized as the development of the regulatory state in the context of globalization (Majone, 1996; Yeung, 2011; Levi-Faur, 2013), has also reached the world of learning at the higher education level. However, as King (2007: 412) argues, "regulatory research generally appears less interested in higher education in comparison with other sectors". Accordingly, there are not many studies from the perspective of regulatory governance that focus on higher education policy. An early exception is the study of higher education control systems in eight countries in by C. Hood (2004). Despite this lack of attention, it has been argued that there is no intrinsic regulatory 'exceptionalism' with respect to higher education and, more importantly, that analyses of the 'higher education regulatory state' would benefit from a greater application of broader regulatory concepts (King, 2007). It is in this area that UNIREGOV would make an original contribution.

We argue that in recent years the higher education sector has become a primary component of the regulatory state, meaning that new policy instruments of a regulatory and supervisory nature have been introduced massively to steer universities and other organizations operating in this sector. The continuous introduction of new systems of control, as well as standards and assessment mechanisms in higher education in the last decades, has suggested the characterization of the "evaluative state" to

refer to how the public institutions are increasingly active in governing this sector by non-conventional means (Guy Neave, 1998). In fact, as regulation is less intrusive than direct control by the state, it can be better tolerated by academics, who are often reluctant to more direct state control: "regulation of the higher education sector is thus equally a politics of surveillance where quality assurance serves as an instrument of accreditation" (Jarvis, 2014: 156). Thus, the introduction of a more explicit regulatory approach to study higher education policies and institutions reveals with clarity how policy processes are made, and how rules are implemented in this field.

How these new regulatory governance approaches have been introduced may diverge largely across countries, and the process of adoption can have an important role in explaining the contours and shaping primary goals of these new instruments designed to foster HE quality. Beyond a general logic of diffusion in this policy sector, we might find modernization policies focusing on transforming highly bureaucratic and inefficient HE ministries, or domestic politicians aiming to cope with the commodification of HE institutions and the rule of loose markets. Alternatively there may even be bottom-up processes, whereby leading universities and local (and regional) authorities push generically for policy reforms in quality assurance. Obviously, the very concept of quality in HE cannot be completely encapsulated and free of influences, but most probably will absorb and be shaped by policy intentions and the goals of policy actors introducing this regulatory change.

In any case, quality assurance has become, from many perspectives, a key instrument for regulatory governance in the higher education sector: "Quality assurance of higher education is ubiquitous because it provides a means for governments to check higher education [...it] can be used to encourage a degree of compliance to policy requirements or to control a burgeoning private sector" (Harvey and Newton 2007: 225, quoted by Jarvis 2014). Its broad implementation in current times may not only have an impact on higher institutions outputs, but may also bring a shift in the power distribution of the actors involved. Despite the traditional reluctance of university actors to be steered by external forces, quality instruments have become a successful strategy to introduce more guidance in university activities from external sources (Musselin 2014). This is the main reason why we argue that quality assurance is an instrument of regulatory governance.

Regulatory governance includes a variety of policy instruments that are aimed to steer and nudge actors involved in policy implementation towards new goals; regulation and supervision are understood as a broad range of interventions aimed at shaping behaviors, whereas command and control, or strict prohibitions, are only part of the large toolbox of possible measures (Jordana and Levi-Faur, 2004). In a quality assessment process, the evaluation of standards and teaching processes is a form of supervising existing

regulations that focus on guarantying minimal quality settings. However, this is more complex than simply inspecting these rules in a particular case. Accreditation processes involve a sophisticated methodology with several interactive dynamics that ideally requires, from both parts, some flexibility. It is, therefore, necessary to revise and adjust existing practices, but also to negotiate particular interpretations of the standards adapted in each place.

As Brennan suggested (1997), debates about quality assurance are often debates about power and change in higher education institutions. In 2000, Brennan and Shah conceptualized the impact of quality assurance within universities in three ways: a) by rewards and penalties that the accreditation may produce (e. g. status, income, influence), b) by changing internal policies and structures of universities as a reaction to the accreditation requirements, and c) by changing higher education cultures as some activities and attitudes gain relevance and esteem internally. Interestingly, they found that the diverse mechanisms used to assess quality had different impacts on HEIs: while self-evaluation had more impact on organizational cultures, institutional quality assurance had more impact on cultures and structures/policies, and external evaluation had a stronger impact on structures/policies and rewards. Thus they concluded that the introduction of quality assurance practices has an impact on the power distribution within universities, and reinforced extrinsic values (society/economy) over intrinsic (academic) values.

Keeping this perspective in mind, however, we are interested in observing the policy dimension of quality assurance practices, identifying them as an instrument of regulatory governance, as stated previously. This means that we should observe in more in detail the definition of quality standards at the level of policy-formulation, and, also, how they are implemented in practice. For example, we would very much like to scrutinize the role of elected politicians (both legislative and executive), civil servants in the ministry and those responsible in the assessment agency in defining and agreeing about the standards to be implemented. Another aspect we are interested in is how these standards are negotiated when implemented at the university level: how professionals, university members, and stakeholders participate in assessment exercises and how they agree on informal criteria to adapt standards to different local settings.

As mentioned before, this paper aims to establish a conceptual framework to study the governance of the HE area (but not about governance of universities from inside) from the perspective of quality assurance as a policy instrument. Its expansion has represented an important shift in HE public policy during this recent period. The establishment of accreditation procedures to supervise the academic offer of universities, as well as the creation of autonomous agencies in charge of managing these new processes has become the more visible result of these changes. However, it is necessary to take into account that differences are likely to be very

important across countries, and policies employed by governments and other actors to reform higher education institutions differ largely.

Three traditional models of university governance have been identified: the state-centered model, the market-oriented model, and the academic self-governance (Dobbins & Knill, 2014), and since the 1990s new policies for the governance of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been introduced in most countries, irrespective of the governance model on which they were based. A renewed interest in public intervention in higher education — based on considerations about the important role of higher education in economic development — contributed to the introduction of new instruments to steer this sector (Paradeise et al. 2009).

At the same time, states seemed increasingly willing to step away from direct intervention in the management of higher education (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). Thus, the introduction of program accreditation as a new policy instrument for the governance of HEI became central to the policy agenda. Also, new institutions were created to implement this new instrument, called evaluation committees, accreditation councils, quality assurance agencies, etc. In general, these new institutions undertook a broad range of regulatory functions for higher education, such as setting standards, monitoring activities, and applied enforcement when required (Hood et al., 2001; Scott, 2004). Traditional higher education governance thus tended to transform into hybrid steering approaches, with multi-actor, multi-level governance frameworks emerging (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000), although traditional differences still remained important between countries and raise many questions about the consequences of such transformations.

Quality assurance as a policy instrument

The evolution of higher education policy over the last two decades has triggered a renewed interest in quality. As has been pointed out by many, if efficiency was the buzzword of the 1980s, quality was the watchword of the 1990s. The rapid expansion of student numbers, the general quest for better public services, and the increasing competition among HEI for resources and students triggered the renewed interest in quality (Green, 1994). In parallel, the expansion of transnational or cross-border higher education in those years also prompted demands for quality assurance (Dos Santos, 2002; Stella, 2006). Lastly, in the 2000s, new modalities in higher education, such as the development of digital learning technologies, presented new challenges to the regulation of higher education. As a result of these changes, it has been argued that HEIs are in a transitional phase in which "the legitimacy of

its mission, organization, functioning, moral foundation, ways of thought, and resources are thrown into doubt and challenged" (Olsen, 2007: 28).

In fact, a fundamental change in how higher education policy is formulated and implemented is related to the introduction of quality assessment as a policy instrument. The introduction of quality assessment in higher education has been one of the major innovations in the area, creating a new framework for policy-making. As a new policy instrument that has emerged massively in recent years worldwide, quality assurance provides tools to set standards, establish learning goals, and to incentivize best practices, among other aspects. It is also important to highlight that quality assurance has been strongly associated with the establishment of autonomous agencies focusing on the supervision of universities. Combining the introduction of this policy instrument with its implementation via agencies has possibly become one of the most relevant drivers for the transformation of universities in most recent years, having the capability to mobilize and stress the routines and conventional operating procedures in the delivery of teaching in most universities (either at the University level, school level, or even program level).

Here we will concentrate on examining this particular instrument, the external assessment of university teaching by autonomous agencies, separated from the government. In fact, quality assurance policies are rapidly transforming HEIs over the world. Initially, they were introduced as quality standards to be adopted voluntarily as best practices by universities, often driven by a bottom-up logic or through diffusion dynamics. However, at a second stage these standards tend to become the protocols adopted by QAAs to set the conditions required for obtaining a degree or institutional accreditation. In this sense, there was a parallel process of institutional change in this sector: QAAs (mostly of a public nature and founded by public sources) were created elsewhere and mushroomed quite quickly, while in many countries their governments started to introduce accreditation requirements for authorizing teaching activities in higher education. Thus, periodic accreditation become the mechanism employed to assess — both ex-ante and ex-post — the quality of university teaching; and, in addition to that, its coercive side — the risk of being denied accreditation, or being signaled as a bad performer — emerged as a powerful mechanism to steer the behavior of universities.

This is a very relevant change in comparison with previous situations. In predominantly public university systems, for many decades the major governance instruments for most countries were detailed regulations of how universities should operate, including several controls to supervise university activities and the direct funding of universities, which was a clear action to pinpoint policy priorities. Also, major actors of higher education governance were traditional executive units — for example education ministries, and science and technology stakeholders, as well as professional groups of university professors.

In countries where private universities were relatively important, beyond some public controls such as mechanisms of inspection or auditing, the system of quality assurance mostly relied on self-regulatory mechanisms. Similarly, some public systems, according to their own governance traditions, were based largely on self-governance systems supported by reputation schemes.

Hence, quality assurance became a key preoccupation for states, regardless of their prevailing governance model. In this context, a burgeoning body of literature emerged, paying special attention to the processes and mechanisms of quality assurance in HE. One of the prominent topics in this literature on HE quality was, understandably, defining and measuring quality (Harvey and Knight, 1996). In the 1980s and 1990s, quality was commonly defined as excellence and was assessed according to the internal resources of an institution (Koslowski, 2006). However, since the end of the 1990s, quality in HE has frequently also included a procedural logic, its "fitness for purpose" — referring to the policies, attitudes, actions, and procedures to assess and achieve quality (Woodhouse, 1999: 30). Within this context, the introduction of a new policy instrument in higher education policy — quality assurance — lead to a major, global transformation of the traditional interactions between governments and HEIs from the 2000s onwards.

However, this was not without criticisms and challenges. On the one hand, it was argued that the abundance of quality assurance initiatives, with different evaluation, accreditation, and data collection procedures, may cause fatigue among universities, as they have to continuously report activities undertaken to external bodies (Westerheijden, 2007). On the other hand, we should also note the increasing activity of global private regulators, such as the producers of rankings, led by large for-profit companies. Such private actors are contributing heavily to the international reputation of universities, and it seems that their assessments are increasingly displacing the relevance of national agencies among those universities which are more attentive to global and regional markets.

Based on managerial autonomy, political independence, and scientific expertise as fundamental elements for the improvement of policy outcomes, numerous agencies were established to regulate an increasing variety of sectors worldwide (Jordana et al., 2011, 2018). Within this context, the case of quality assurance in higher education emerges as an area where the agency model has become extremely popular. The creation of QAAs was perceived as the main instrument to achieve quality assurance. Thus, QAAs proliferated rapidly and established multiple international networks, both in Europe and globally . In Europe, the Bologna Process led to the adoption of a governance design for QAAs which stresses their independence from policy-makers and universities as well. Therefore, a QAA must be able to demonstrate that "[t]he definition and operation of its procedures and methods, the nomination and appointment of

external experts, and the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence" (ENQA 2005: 25).

However, as is well known by scholars familiar with the process of agencification in the context of the regulatory state, the establishment of these agencies also raised questions of legitimacy and accountability (Flinders & Smith, 1999; Scott, 2000; Schmitter & Trechsel, 2004; Bianculli et al., 2014). In the particular case of higher education policy, the process of agencification has led to specific problems related to their capacity to promote effective improvement of HEIs quality (Woodhouse, 2004), and their particular sources of legitimacy to introduce new quality standards, for example their involvement in international networks (Bleiklie et al., 2010).

In addition to this, the number of actors currently involved in the governance of HEIs has largely increased: in addition to the previous actors we mentioned, we now have local and regional authorities heavily involved; independent agencies in charge of assessing university activities; funding bodies mainly focusing on supporting research; ranking agencies continuously providing comparative assessments; and international bodies coordinating operating at regional and global scale. Self-regulation has diminished, to a certain extent, and assurance agencies and their own networks of actors have become a common trait in most university systems overall. Thus, governance is much more complex, and the instruments employed are more diverse and have become much more sophisticated.

2.   Research goals

It is important to clarify that we will not attempt to explain the entire transformation of university institutions in recent years that occurred under multiple challenges and constraints. There are many potential factors to be considered that has led to the transformation of universities; budgetary incentives and constraints, the interconnection of research and teaching, fostering teaching transformations (and the massive introduction of ICT tools), and many other changes have challenged the traditional status quo in the performance of universities. Our concerns are much more reduced, focusing on the role of public action to promote better delivery of university programs and making universities better adapted to current social and economic challenges.

A main goal of this research is to better understand the process of agencification in higher education policy. How it was developed over time, which formal influences impacted this process, how this changed the way policy-making

worked in this policy field are just some of the research questions that inspire this research project. However, a second and complementary goal is to understand the key policy instrument that represents the main responsibility of quality assurance agencies: accreditation. We are interested in scrutinizing how quality assurance — by means of program (or institutional) accreditation — has been designed, formulated, and implemented worldwide; how agencies have adopted this instrument as their main tool to improve quality in HEI, and how diverse stakeholders have reacted to this initiative — including HEI themselves.

The regulation of higher education is conventionally associated with several different regulatory modes or styles (Hood et al., 2004). Nevertheless, as we have described above, in recent decades there has been a process of global diffusion of the establishment of independent or semi-independent agencies to regulate quality in higher education across states. Hence, it has been suggested that there are common features across national quality assurance frameworks, including the predominance of agencies (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). This expectation is one of the first issues we aim to discuss in detail. To what extent there is a complete agencification in this sector, and how agencies that were created converged in their institutional characteristics or not, are some of the more specific research questions we aim to discuss in the context of this research. Consequently, UNIREGOV builds towards a larger research agenda to ask if agencies' features constitute a 'general model' on which individual countries may be converging, or whether distinctive patterns still prevail in different countries. It is clear, however, that a more complex environment of quality assurance regulation has been emerging globally in recent years for the governance of HEI, creating more sophisticated policy communities in which processes of learning and emulation among peers potentially occur continuously over time.

Several studies have, in fact, challenged the extent of the applicability of such a 'general model', arguing that a substantial variation in the regulation of quality assurance has remained, particularly regarding the profile of agencies and the characteristics of the instruments implemented (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Stensaker, 2003; Billing, 2004). Interestingly, Brennan and Shah (2000) stated that not all countries had a quality assurance agency (e.g. Italy), and in some countries there was not one single agency but rather many (e.g. Canada, Germany, Mexico, Spain, USA). In a similar vein, based on further comparisons grounded on an extension of the 1993 study, Billing (2004) showed that a 'general model' of quality assurance does not universally apply, but that most elements of it do apply in most countries.

One phenomenon that supports the argument of a convergence toward a general model of regulation on quality assurance is the proliferation of international networks of QAAs at a global and regional level. The most important of such networks at a global level is the International Network

for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), a voluntary association with a principle aim of collecting and disseminating information on theory and practice in the assessment, improvement, and maintenance of quality in higher education. Moreover, INQAAHE also aims to develop credible national higher education quality assurance agencies (Morse, 2006), for example through publishing guidelines, such as the Guidelines of Good Practice (GGP). The purpose of the Guidelines is to promote good practice for internal and/or external quality assurance, but its goals also include creating a framework to guide the creation of new quality agencies (INQAAHE, 2003: 4). These international institutions may be a driver for greater sector diffusion, as network governance theory suggests (King, 2007). In fact, as Aelterman (2006) has observed, there are already similarities in the transparency and comparability of quality assurance codes of practice and in the guidelines of quality agencies, which are based on INQAAHE guidelines.

It may also be the case that harmonization processes at the regional level have contributed to greater convergence of the model of regulation of HEIs. As it is well known, cross-national policy convergence can also be the result of patterns of communication and information exchange in transnational networks. According to Holzinger and Knill (2005), lesson-drawing, transnational problem solving, emulation, and international policy promotion are all convergence-promoting forms of transnational communication. Hence, there have been studies analyzing the convergence of higher education policies as a consequence of the Bologna Process in Europe, which started with the Bologna declaration in 1999 aimed at creating a common European HE area (Witte, 2006; Dobbins & Knill, 2009; Voegtle et al., 2010). Interestingly, Voegtle et al (2000) found that some higher education policies have diffused beyond the members of the Bologna Process, pointing to transnational communication as an inducer of policy change even for countries not participating in the respective harmonization process.

Quality assurance policies are not neutral, and neither they are purely technocratic. An important part of the existing literature on the regulation of higher education is dedicated to the impact of quality assurance instruments on the policy processes in which are involved. Thus, states, as the key stakeholders in most higher education systems, have implemented different policies to direct the control of academic standards, such as professional regulation, market regulation or direct governmental regulation (Schwart & Westerheijden, 2004; Dill & Beerkens, 2012; Dobbins & Knill, 2014), which leave varying degrees of autonomy to HEI and allow them to pursue diverse strategies. Academic literature has paid considerable attention to the strengths and weaknesses of the variety of regulatory instruments used by states for assuring academic quality (Dill & Beerkens, 2012), but less attention to the relationship between regulatory instruments and types of university governance. However, how these HEI policies interact with their quality assurance instruments, and the role of the agencies implementing them, is something that we should focus on closely in this project.

3.   Research hypotheses

We argue that the regulatory governance approach is a relevant point of departure for exploring the questions we raised before. As argued by Christensen (2010), regulatory reforms introduced by new HEI policies in many countries are likely to reflect, to a degree, more general reform trends in the wider political-administrative system and society (Levi-Faur, 2011). More concretely, there is a need for a more comprehensive comparative analysis of the characteristics of QAAs across countries and regions and to discuss how this combines with the introduction of regulatory instruments in the area. In addition, there is a need to better understand how policy communities are articulated around university quality-regulation in each country, as well as their inter-connections, also paying attention to the impact of internationalization on national and sub-national regulatory frameworks. Such communities might be related to the activities of agencies, but also to universities, as the main policy recipients. In most cases these policy communities may opt for strategies of self-regulation or meta-regulation, according to the traditional character of HEI policy in their country. More regulatory stringency and procedural supervision versus more self-regulation and performance-based policies will probably emerge as antagonistic positions of debate in many communities.

In this research project, we do not plan to measure in detail the impact this instrument has made in HE transformations recently, or how effective it was, but to identify and better conceptualize how this instrument works and how its role can be assessed, by means of analyzing which are the actual varieties across countries and sectors. We aim to understand the interactions among the actors involved in operating this instrument, as a way of uncovering the logic of regulatory governance in that area. We expect close resemblances with patterns that are common to other fields of regulatory governance, in the sense that steering is more indirect, based on the logic of supervising, auditing, and reviewing university activities. A different problem is to discuss to what extent this mode of governance has been well adapted to the particularities of specific countries. For example, in some Latin American countries like Peru or Chile, where the unregulated market logic has allowed a mushrooming of private universities in recent decades, the usual instruments of regulatory governance might be not be effective enough to address market failures. Such models of governance can also inspire the interplay between the executive, the agency, and the main stakeholders involved — essentially universities — but also professional associations, students' groups, and education technicians and experts.

Here we summarize our main research questions regarding the rise of regulatory governance in higher education and the role of QAAs:

a) To what extent has the model of independent agencies been adopted in the sector of higher education quality assessment? Which are the more common accountability mechanisms employed by QAAs?

b) To what extent are there patterns of convergence in the quality assurance instruments adopted worldwide? How relevant are policy communities in contributing to their diffusion?

c) How do traditional cross-country differences in the HEI sector (state-control, market-competition, and self-regulation) shape the adoption and implementation of new instruments?

Building on these questions, we aim to discuss four key basic hypotheses, which derive mainly from our previous work in different areas of regulatory governance and the relevant literature on independent regulatory agencies:

a) Hypothesis 1. The introduction of accreditation as a regulatory instrument in higher education quality assurance has been widespread, as a new global standard.

b) Hypothesis 2. Existing models of HE governance — "state-sponsored", "market-oriented", and "non-profit private" — shaped the way instruments for quality assessment were introduced in each country.

c) Hypothesis 3. Quality assurance instruments can also be used to introduce larger policy changes, with the aim of transforming the existing HE governance models.

d) Hypothesis 4. QAAs became the prevailing institutional form of implementing accreditation, for all models of HE governance.

e) Hypothesis 5. International networks of QAAs, global and regional, operating through transnational higher education networks, were central to the diffusion of accreditation instruments for quality assessment.

f) Hypothesis 6. More independent QAAs will be more innovative in the implementation of regulatory instruments (introducing stronger accreditation procedures).

g) Hypothesis 7. Policy divergences and tensions are expected to emerge when political principals and/or quality agencies are not capable of adapting instruments to their local characteristics.

h)   **Hypothesis 8.** Relations between politicians, public servants, professionals, business associations, and other stakeholders will be more intense when these instruments attempt stronger HEI policy changes.

In addition to the creation of a large dataset on the institutional characteristics of quality assurance agencies worldwide, six case studies (Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Spain, and the UK) are planned to support this research project to contribute to a better understanding of some key theoretical problems in the analysis of quality assurance regulation in HEIs. We expect these case studies to provide clarifications and allow some preliminary hypothesis testing. Initially, four countries were the main target of our case studies: Mexico, Chile, Spain, and the UK. Two other countries, Peru and Brazil, were added to examine in more detail the Latin American region and its public-private mixes. The variation comes from two basic dimensions; first, the traditional model of higher education that has dominated each country for decades (public dominant or public-private mix); and, second, the level of innovation in regulatory instruments introduced in each country. After identifying and selecting relevant agencies in each case, we will map the policy community around and will also focus on the introduction of accreditation as a major policy instrument. The different types of actors to be considered include politicians, business, labor, academics, civil society, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Figure 1. Criteria for case selection

	Dominant Public HE institutions	**Mix Public- Private HE institutions**
High innovation in regulatory instruments	United Kingdom	Chile, Peru
Low innovation in regulatory instruments	Spain	Mexico, Brazil

Our hypothesis 2 is that traditional models of university governance — "state-sponsored", "market-oriented", and "non-profit private regulation" — shaped the way quality assessment, as a regulatory instrument, was introduced in higher education. It is our suspicion that the instrument works and performs differently according to each model. In some cases, quality assessment is introduced as a way to reduce quality uncertainty and to regulate a growing and increasingly internationalized market. In other cases, quality assurance as a regulatory instrument aims to introduce larger market dynamics in the sector. However, the impact of this instrument in the evolution of universities, as well as the specific tensions that its introduction has generated in each of these different countries, is still to be analyzed. Also, quality assessment

can also be used for convergence purposes, as is the case with EU member states, where QAAs can guide low-profile processes of regulatory harmonization. We expect that the comparison of the different case studies, as detailed in figure 1, will allow us to discuss this hypothesis in more detail.

Another perspective to consider is the goal of regulation when quality assurance is specifically introduced in higher education in order to address some perceived problems. Hypothesis 6 to 8 deal with diverse configurations that could stress this policy field. Thus, we might find a goal aimed at preventing major risks in higher education, for example those for students derived from the delivery of very low-quality education, or those derived from universities lowering standards in order to balance budgets. However, it is also possible to find a goal oriented to create a market, or to segment several markets in higher education, or just to raise entry barriers to the market. Many different strategies can be introduced using regulatory instruments in order to shape universities' markets, and, in particular, also to define quality standards. Many options are possible for assessment agencies and other decision-makers in this sector, such as market-making, market-stabilizing, market-avoidance, etc., and in a context of policy diffusion all these strategies travel, and are easily adopted in other countries.

4. Methodology

As was explored in the previous sections, we aim to analyze how the regulatory state has expanded in the field of higher education. For this purpose, we focus on a specific area, the regulation of learning quality, the specialized institutions responsible for performing that function — QAAs — and the specific instruments used for these purposes. To do that, the research design of this project includes the elaboration of a database of quality agencies throughout the world, as well as the realization of six case studies about the specific QAAs and the selection of the regulatory instruments in each case — their internal policy dynamics, and the global and international context within which they operate.

On the one hand, to build this global database of QAAs, the data collection process will proceed in two phases. At an initial stage, a mapping exercise of the global universe of agencies will be conducted. At a second stage, the initial sample will be further reduced to build a global database of QAAs, which will cover the existing agencies in at least one hundred countries. As a result, this database will document 60 variables that will encompass, among others, the year of establishment of the agencies, the instruments used by QAAs to measure quality in higher education, their major institutional characteristics (particularly their levels of political independence, organizational autonomy, and accountability mechanisms), and some basic organizational and institutional variables at the moment of creation. The main source for the construction of the

database will be information available on the characteristics of each institution on the websites of the agencies, as well as legal repositories in each country.

On the other hand, a series of case studies will complement this database. The case studies are planned to support this research project, to contribute to a better understanding of some key theoretical problems in the analysis of quality assurance regulation in higher education. Apart from conducting a literature review for all cases, an online survey will be launched in four countries: Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Spain. This survey will be directed to the people responsible for the quality assurance units of all HEIs, in order to gather their individual opinions regarding how quality assurance policy is conducted and performed in their respective countries. The survey will be structured in at least four parts: 1) the organizational and institutional characteristics of the quality assurance unit; 2) their activities and responsibilities, especially regarding university accreditation processes; 3) the unit's positioning within the HEI and its relationship with the rest of the units and departments; 4) the interviewees' vision of the quality assurance universe, both at the national and the international level.

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