STATE OF THE ART ON CONCEPTIONS OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Estado del arte sobre concepciones de la calidad de la educación superior

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Abstract

Given the polysemic and multidimensional nature of the notion of quality and its centrality and growing relevance in higher education, it is necessary to lay the foundations for conceptualizing it in terms of its context of application, in order to provide support and consistency to the design of specific policies. This paper presents the main methodological guidelines and findings of an exhaustive literature review focused on identifying the conceptions of quality in higher education in papers published in high-impact international journals between 2016 and 2020. Following the axial guidelines of the PRISMA-P method, 186 articles were selected out of 53,290 identified as the initial universe. An analysis using open deductive coding, enabled identifying prevailing conceptions of the quality of higher education and its valued components. Another noteworthy finding is the relevance of grouping these conceptions into two categories –"quality en soi" and "quality pour soi"– which are very similar to the positions taken in two very influential publications in Latin America. A crucial question arose from the analysis of the articles selected for review: who is responsible for determining the quality of a product or service in higher education? The answer to this question gave rise to the emergence of an alternative theoretical-conceptual positioning to those underlying those two categories: "quality pour qui" (quality for whom).

Keywords

Higher education, quality, literature review, state of the art, PRISMA-P method, targeted policies.

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Resumen

Dado el carácter polisémico y multidimensional de la noción *calidad* y de su centralidad y relevancia creciente en la educación superior, resulta necesario sentar bases que permitan conceptualizarla en función de su contexto de aplicación, de modo de dar sustento y consistencia al diseño de políticas focalizadas. El artículo expone los principales lineamientos metodológicos y resultados de una exhaustiva revisión bibliográfica orientada a esos efectos, centrada en la identificación de las concepciones sobre *calidad de la educación superior* en artículos publicados entre 2016 y 2020 en revistas de alto impacto internacional. Una vez finalizada la revisión, que siguió los lineamientos axiales del método PRISMA-P, quedaron seleccionados 186 artículos del universo inicial de 53 290. Un análisis por codificación abierta deductiva permitió identificar las concepciones predominantes de la calidad de la educación superior y sus componentes valorados como sustantivos. Otro de los resultados destacables es la pertinencia de agrupar esas concepciones en dos categorías —"calidad *en soi*" y "calidad *pour soi*"—, muy afines con las posiciones asumidas en dos textos muy influyentes en Hispanoamérica. Del análisis de los artículos seleccionados surgió una interrogante crucial: ¿a quién le corresponde determinar la calidad de un producto o servicio en educación superior? La respuesta a esta pregunta dio lugar a la emergencia de un posicionamiento teórico-conceptual alternativo a los subyacentes en esas categorías: "calidad *pour qui*" (calidad para quién, calidad para quiénes).

Palabras clave

Educación superior, calidad, revisión bibliográfica, estado del arte, Método PRISMA-P, políticas focalizadas.

Introduction

Current academic production focused on the issue of defining the concept of *quality in higher education* and of its main components, of great theoretical, political and practical reference, is abundant and very diverse regarding approaches and theoretical and/or empirical addressing strategies. In this context, the objective of study outlined here was to determine and analyze the current state of such production, as a base for a conception of *quality in higher education* that results adequate to its context of application and fruitful for policy formulation in that area. In other words, such objective is not exhausted in itself, but it is put into service of a conceptual construction whose relevance and usefulness are supported on the knowledge of the current academic production about such topic.

Quality is a concept that has acquired a remarkable centrality, relevance and ubiquity in numerous areas of contemporary industrialized societies, including the area of higher education, which it is the object of interest and analysis from at least four decades ago (Avci, 2017; Lomas, 2002; Nabaho et al., 2019; Saarinen, 2010; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011).

Nevertheless, its polysemic nature (Scharager, 2018) and often vague and ambiguous (Goff, 2017) continues posing difficulties to any initiative of design and evaluation of educational systems, plans, programs and organizations. Indeed, the extensive existing literature referred to the concept of *quality of higher education*, far from having led to a precise and widely accepted definition, reveals the great difficulties that block fulfilling such attempt (Matei, 2016; Pompili, 2010; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016). This situation has caused a process of semantic oversaturation and, paradoxically, of deflation of meanings (Acevedo, 2011), specially because it is a concept in constant change and not susceptible of a unique interpretation (Zepke, 2014). But the paradox is only apparent; if multiple perspectives and meanings of *quality* are admitted, the concept becomes less useful as a change tool, or even with no sense.

In any case, even though *quality* continues to be a complex notion, and with very diverse senses and applications, explaining its features recurring to its subjective nature, as some experts have intended (Municio, 2005), does not contribute to elucidating the concept and its multiple senses and meanings. This nature does not necessarily invalidate —and it should not do it— finding a definition that is precise and adjusted to the context in which the concept is applied (Acevedo, 2008; Prisacariu and Shah, 2016; Reeves and Bednar, 1994), even if it is recognized that a definition sufficiently agreed by players within a single school organization

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rarely exists (Mendoza and Ortegón, 2019; Pompili, 2010). Moreover, it is not even usual that a concrete definition of the concept of *quality* exists in the documents of the institutions whose mission is assuring the quality in higher education institutions; indeed, as stated by Goff (2017), although these documents may propose quality indicators and metrics, they do not provide a definition or description of its meaning; in general, organizations are liberated from this task.

In the area of higher education, the concept of *quality* is very controversial (Acevedo, 2008) and complex (Acosta, 2015; Cabrera, 2005; Cardoso et al., 2016; Harvey & Green, 1993; Larrauri et al., 2015). It has been highlighted its ubiquitous and elusive, since different groups of agents attribute different meanings to it (Cheng, 2014; Goff, 2017; Gvaramadze, 2008; Harvey & Green, 1993; Nabaho et al., 2019; Neave, 1986; Newton, 2002, 2010; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016; Weenink et al., 2018) nature. In many works it is also described as a multidimensional (i.e., Avci, 2017; Barreto & Kalnin, 2018; Brunner, 1992; Elton, 1998; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Kleijnen et al., 2013; Krause, 2012; Nabaho et al., 2019; Reeves & Bednar, 1994; Sarrico et al., 2010; Scharager, 2018; Toranzos, 1996; Vesce et al., 2020; Westerheijden et al., 2007), dynamic (Boyle & Bowden, 1997; Ewell, 2010; Harvey 2005; Westerheijden et al., 2014) and relative concept, since it depends on the way it is perceived and conceptualized by different players of the area (Baird, 1998; Cardoso et al., 2018; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Newton, 2007; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Middlehurst & Elton, 1992; Mortimore & Stone, 1991; Newton, 2010; Scharager, 2018; Welzant et al., 2015; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011).

These singular features of the concept of *quality of higher education* inhibit the possibility of the existence of a definition with a generalized acceptance in the international academic community. Nearly two thirds of century ago, i.e., three decades before it began to be installed as an axial notion in the field of higher education, Gallie (1956) qualified it as a concept essentially disputed. The abundant and very diverse academic production published in the last four decades confirms this perception, even though such dispute has been fed by increasingly varied foundations.

In its application to higher education, a dispute plane, indicated by different authors (Filippakou, 2011; Newton, 2002, among others), has been the recognition that such concept is involved in a power struggle in which the adoption of certain conceptual definitions reflects a competition for a better academic positioning. Blanco (2013) has emphasized that the concept of *quality* takes part of a symbolic peculiar field constituted as a regulatory framework for discourses, policies and practices. That is

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why, as pointed out by Monarca and Prieto (2018), it is about a field that houses disputes about the way to understand educational institutions and organizations, their functions and relationships with other areas of the social world, including the statewide one. Its influence in the sense of the educational policies and practices is, hence, very significant. Then, it becomes necessary to study how does it take part as a prominent concept in the decision-making processes, specially in the design of higher education policies. In this context, it should be confirmed what was pointed out by Prisacariu y Shah (2016): *quality* is never a neutral concept, but it inevitably responds to a tacit idea about higher education, about its sense and purpose, its values and underlying ideological assumptions.

In addition, the difficulties to achieve a definition of the concept of *quality* with generalized acceptance are increased, when including another circumstance referred, rather than to the concept itself, to the context of its application: what should be taken into consideration, the quality *of* education or the quality *in* education? Even though both conceptions are often employed indistinctly (under the generic expression "*quality in higher education*"), some experts establish a distinction. For example, Pérez-Juste (2005) considers that the concept of quality *of* education focuses on the education objectives, whereas the concept of quality *in* education is associated to the processes and factors necessary to achieve quality results: directive and administrative management, human resources and materials, evaluation. Thus, quality *of* education is a broader concept than that of quality *in* education (Rodríguez-Morales, 2017).

The main methodological guidelines that were applied in an exhaustive literature review will be sketched in the following section; such review was focused on the identification of the definitions and conceptions about the notion of *quality of higher education* present in academic papers published recently. Some of the main results obtained will be presented and discussed in subsequent sections, with the purpose of putting into context the current state of the art about the topic. As a conclusion, the theoretical-conceptual positioning of the authors of the present paper will be explained, and the implications on the higher education field of the results emerging from the literature review conducted will be highlighted. At last, the main limitations of the study carried out, lines of continuity and future analyses that may be potentially fruitful, will be mentioned.

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Review of the current international academic production about the conception of quality of higher education

An exhaustive literature review was conducted with the purpose of establishing, in the current international scientific literature about the topic of *quality of higher education*, a state of the art focused on the identification of the predominant conceptions about this notion and its main components. It is our belief that the results of such review will provide solid foundations on which to sustain a conception of *quality of higher education* that results useful and suitable for the formulation of educational policies and programs in that field.
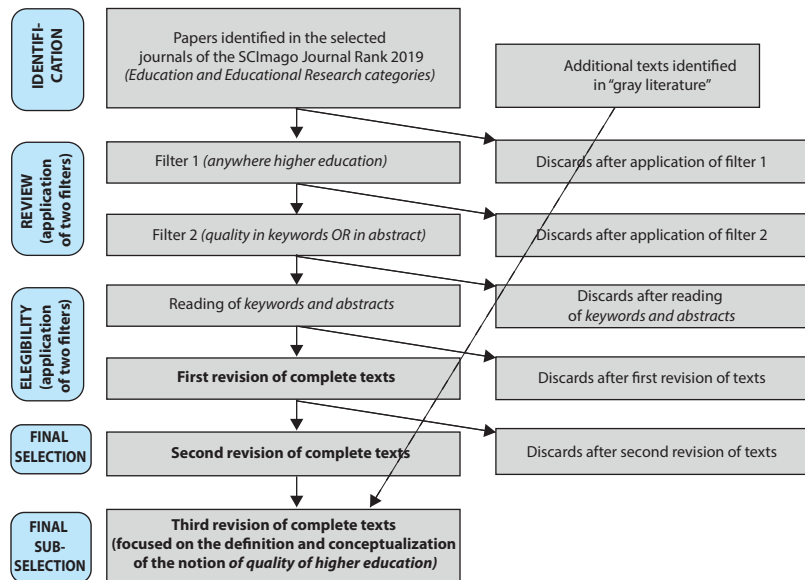
The literature review was conducted based on the fundamental guidelines of the PRISMA-P method developed by Moher et al. (2009), and further adjusted by Shamseer et al. (2015) for systematic reviews and meta-analysis. The sequence of the review is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

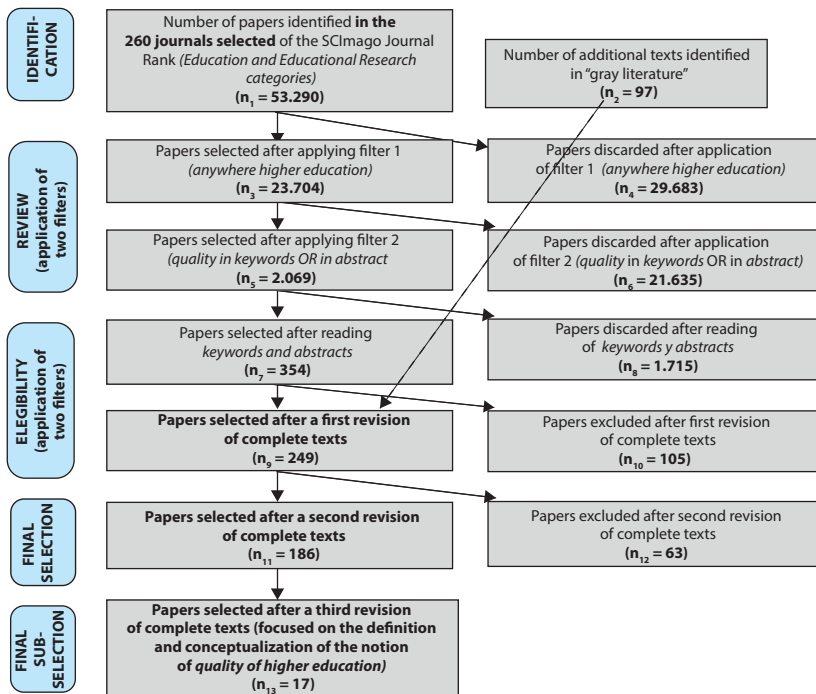Flow diagram of the review of papers about the quality of higher education

Source: Made by the authors, based on Moher et al. (2009).

The search was restricted to the papers published in the period 2016-2020 in a selection of 1272 journals in the categories "*Education*" and "*Educational Research*" of the *SCImago Journal Rank* of 2019 (SJR-2019 hereinafter).

The journals were selected based on the adequacy of their name to the thematic focus considered. As a result, 260 journals were selected, 80 % of which are published in English: 88 of the 306 journals of quartile Q1, 70 of the 307 of quartile Q2, 56 of the 304 of quartile Q3, 35 of the 293 of quartile Q4 and 11 of the 62 journals without categorization. Among the 260 journals selected, 60 % correspond to the United Kingdom (92) and to the United States (64); the remaining are distributed in the following countries: Spain (25), Netherlands (15), Brazil (7), Australia (6), Switzerland (5), Turkey (5), Mexico (5), South Africa (4), Canada (3), Poland (2), Russia (2), Malaysia (2), New Zealand (2), Colombia (2), Chile (2), and other 17 countries with one journal each.

Figure 2 shows the results obtained in each of the phases of the review conducted.

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Figure 2
Review of papers about the quality of higher education

Note (*): After reading the 97 texts of "gray literature" originally identified, 17 were discarded due to their little relevance. The 80 texts selected in this category correspond to 5 books (6%), 69 book chapters (86%) and 6 papers published in journals (8%)
Source: Made by the authors, based on Moher et al. (2009).

The first phase of the search —designated as "Identification" in the diagram— was restricted to the abstracts and keywords of the papers in each of the 260 journals selected, according to three successive search instances. The first two corresponded to the phase designated as "Review" in the diagram: application of the filter "*higher education*" in any part of the text, followed by the application of the filter "*quality*" in *abstracts* and *keywords*. With the purpose of refining and increasing the sensitivity of the search, besides the aforementioned filters, the following Boolean connectors were used in both instances: (*Quality*) AND (*Education* OR *Educational* OR *Academic*) AND (*Education* OR *Teaching*) and the corresponding ones in Spanish: (Calidad) AND (Educación OR Educativa OR Académica) AND (Enseñanza).

The second phase of the review —designated as "Eligibility" in the diagram— consisted in the selection of papers based on the reading of abstracts and keywords of the 2069 papers selected in the previous phase. Then, a new selection was made based on the reading of the complete texts of the 354 papers selected in the previous instance, as well as the 97 texts corresponding to "gray literature" (books, book chapters and papers published in journals not indexed in the SJR-2019. Narrative reviews, scales, validation of scales and studies of distance education systems were excluded in this phase. Thus, 249 papers, from the initial universe of 53,290, and 80 texts of "gray literature" (five books, 69 book chapters and six papers) were selected.

In the "Final Selection" phase those 249 pre-selected papers were subject to a very detailed second reading, which resulted in the selection of 186 papers of the total of 53,290 papers published in the 260 journals included in the search universe. An analysis of topics using open deductive coding was conducted from this second reading, which enabled making brief reviews of the most relevant results about the conception of quality of higher education and its components considered as substantial. In addition, this analysis enabled to identify the main standards considered in the evaluation of the quality of higher education. The results of this phase were recorded and arranged in a spreadsheet that includes: journal name, paper title, author(s), publication date, keywords, country in which the study was applied, type of study (empirical or non-empirical), methodological strategy (quantitative, qualitative, mixed), predominant dimensions or standards in the conception of *quality*, and the size and features of the analysis unit and/or of the constructed sample (teachers, students, staff members, managers, experts, others).

At last, it was of particular interest to select, from these 186 papers, those with analytical focus in the conception of *quality of higher education*, whose content resulted very useful in developing this text, especially at the moment of analyzing and weighing the results obtained in the review conducted. From the third reading carried out with this purpose —designated as "Final Sub-selection" in the diagram — 17 papers were selected, some of which were already mentioned in the introduction of the present paper.

Presentation and discussion of the main results of the literature review

Five big groups of results emerged from the literature review:

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- The existence of a work that remains, nearly thirty years after its publication, the one with the greatest influence in the academic production about the conception of quality of higher education.
- The confirmation that, despite its notorious diversity, the great majority of the definitions and conceptions about such notion may be arranged in groups clearly differentiated based on their theoretical-conceptual foundations, which present an appreciable affinity with the positions assumed by two experts whose works were very influential in the last fifteen years, at least in the Hispano-American realm.
- The identification of the components or standards mostly employed for evaluating the quality of higher education: education and professional performance of teachers, rigor, exigency, curriculum integrality and planning, administrative management and organization, academic performance of students, characteristics of the relationship between players, degree of development of motivating studying environments, building structure and available material resources, research activities, extension activities and relationship with local players, governance regime, symbolic dimensions, financial support.
- The existence, confirmed in most of the papers considered, of a correlation between the type of assumed conception of the quality of higher education and the empirical strategy adopted for determining it (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, mixed).

• The identification, in the case of empirical studies, of the predominant analysis units (i.e., teachers, students, graduates, managers, experts).

Due to space reasons, only the results corresponding to the first two sets will be succinctly presented here.

The influence of Lee Harvey and Diana Green in the conception of quality of higher education

After eight years, the stinging question posed in the title of an essay rather mentioned even today —*What the hell is quality?* (Ball, 1985)— obtained, in the paper "Defining Quality" (Harvey & Green, 1993), an answer of fast and enormous acceptance in the international scientific community. Perhaps that acceptance was due to the fact that, far from providing a concrete and concluding answer —nothing of the type *Quality is…*—, it contributed a solid framework for elucidating the concept in the field of higher education.

In "Defining Quality", the authors highlight that the relative nature of the *quality* concept when applied to higher education does not mean that it is about different perspectives of the same concept, but different perspectives about different concepts, but under a same designation: *quality*. In addition, they established five ways to conceive the quality of higher education, which represent, as pointed out by Prisacariu and Shah (2016), the main perspectives often assumed by the diverse players that take part in the field: quality as excellence, quality as consistence or perfection ("*zero errors*"), quality as adjustment to the objectives proposed ("*fitness for purpose*"), quality as economic efficiency regarding the correlation between costs and results ("*value for money*") and quality as transformation.

The authors of most of the papers consulted in the review that refer to those five perspectives (i.e., Cardoso et al., 2018; Cheng, 2017; Scharager, 2018; Tomás & Esteve, 2001; Wicks & Roethlein, 2009; Woodhouse, 1996) agree that the most widely used definition corresponds to the perspective "*fitness for purpose*" and, to a rather smaller extent, to the perspective "*value for money*". As stated by Cheng (2017), a feature common to the perspectives "*fitness for purpose*" and "*value for money*" is their focus on institutional development and on its evaluation by external agencies or agents. The perspective "*value for money*", built around the notion of *accountability*, the quality control devices in pursue of quantifiable results and the consideration of the student as client or consumer (George, 2007; Houston, 2010; Scharager, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017), is closely linked to the neoliberal ideology prevailing in an important part

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of the current western world (Acevedo, 2021; Giroux, 2015; Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013; Saunders, 2010, 2011; Saunders & Blanco, 2017).

Undoubtedly, *"Defining Quality"* (Harvey & Green, 1993) is the most influential and most cited paper with a focus on quality of higher education (Marshall, 2016; Scharager, 2018). In the literature review conducted it is cited 133 times, in 17 % of the papers selected after the first reading of complete texts (in 42 papers of the total of 249 papers selected in that phase); in other words, this work is cited in each of those papers more than three times, in average. The works by both authors separately are also very influential. With the exception of "*Defining Quality*", in that universe of 249 papers there is a total of 128 citations to works authored by Harvey or Green or where one of them is a coauthor. As shown in Table 1, such citations correspond to 33 papers (13 % of the universe under consideration). Therefore, the total sum of both types of citations if 261, i.e., something more that one citation, in average, in each of the 249 papers selected in this phase. These figures are enormously larger to the corresponding to any other paper and/or authors with publications about the topic of interest in journals indexed in the SJR-2019.

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Table 1
Number of citations in the 249 papers selected: (1) to the paper by Harvey and Green (1993); (2) to the papers by Harvey and by Green as authors or coauthors (with the exception of Harvey and Green, 1993)

Q	Authors	citations (1)	citations (2)
1	Akalu (2016)	4	4
1	Alzafari (2018)	1	1
1	Alzafari & Kratzer (2019)	1	1
1	Alzafari & Ursin (2019)	1	2
1	Avci (2017)	14	13
1	Cardoso, Rosa, & Stensaker (2016)	4	9
1	Cardoso, Rosa, Videira, & Amaral (2018)	7	7
1	Cheng (2017)	1	2
1	Das, Mukherjee, & Dutta Roy (2016)	1	-
1	Dicker, García, Kelly, & Mulrooney (2019)	2	2
1	Eliophotou Menon (2016)	8	6
1	Gerritsen-van Leeuwenkampa, Joosten-ten Brinke, & Kesterd (2019)	2	-

1	Giraleas (2019)	1	-
1	Goff (2017)	8	4
1	Hildesheim & Sonntag (2019)	3	3
1	Marshall (2016)	5	1
1	McCowan (2017)	3	-
1	Mukwambo (2019)	1	1
1	Prisacariu & Shah (2016)	3	5
1	Rahnuma (2020)	1	7
1	Sadler (2017)	2	-
1	Sarrico & Alves (2016)	1	5
1	Scharager (2018)	8	2
1	Steinhardt, Schneijderberg, Götze, Baumann, & Krücken (2017)	2	-
1	Tezcan-Unal, Winston, & Qualter (2018)	1	-
1	Vesce, Cisi, Gentile, & Stura (2020)	-	2
1	Kaynardag̃ (2019)	-	1
2	Bertolin (2016)	1	-
2	Brennan (2018)	1	-
2	Giannakis & Bullivant (2015)	2	2
2	Hauptman (2018)	2	2
2	Khalaf (2020)	7	1
2	Leiber, Stensaker, & Harvey (2018)	1	4
2	Seyfried & Pohlenz (2018)	1	-
2	Walls, Carr, Kelder, & Ennever (2018)	1	-
2	Zheng, Cai, & Ma (2017)	12	10
3	Barreto & Kalnin (2018)	6	18
3	Barsoum (2017)	1	2
3	Koķe, Jansone-Ratinika, & Koka (2017)	1	2
3	Mendoza & Ortegon (2019)	1	1
3	Monyatsi & Ngwako (2018)	2	1
3	Nabaho, Aguti, & Oonyu (2019)	6	1
3	Ortíz & Rúa (2017)	-	1
4	Aravena & Meza (2017)	1	-
4	Njie & Asimiran (2016)	2	5
(1): citations in 42 papers (25 Q1, 9 Q2, 6 Q3, 2 Q4) **(2): citations in 33 papers** (20 Q1, 5 Q2, 7 Q3, 1 Q4)	**Sub-total:**	**133**	**128**
	Total:	**261 citations**	

Source: Made by authors.

The influence of this multi-cited work is even greater in the content of the 17 papers that were selected because they are focused on the concept of *quality of higher education*: it is cited in 14 of those 17 papers (82 %), and the total of citations is 70, i.e., an average of five citations per paper. As illustrated in Table 2, the figures are similar in the case of citations to works authored by Harvey or Green separately or where one of them is a coauthor: 72 citations, that appear in 15 of the 17 papers selected (88 %). In this case, the total sum of both types of citations is 142, i.e., something more than eight citations, in average, in each of those 17 papers. Clearly, these are figures much greater than the corresponding to any other paper and/or authors that have published studies about this topic in journals of the SJR-2019.

Tabla 2

Number of citations in the 17 papers selected that are focused on the conception of the notion of *quality of higher education*: (1) to the paper by Harvey and Green (1993); (2) to the papers by Harvey and by Green as authors or coauthors (with the exception of Harvey and Green, 1993)

Q	Authors	Citations (1)	Citations (2)
1	Akalu (2016)	4	4
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1	Cardoso, Rosa, Videira, & Amaral (2018)	7	7
1	Cheng (2017)	1	2
1	Dicker, Garcia, Kelly, & Mulrooney (2019)	2	2
1	Goff (2017)	8	4
1	Marshall (2016)	5	1
1	Mukwambo (2019)	1	1
1	Prisacariu & Shah (2016)	3	5
1	Scharager (2018)	8	2
1	Vesce, Cisi, Gentile, & Stura (2020)	-	2
3	Alvarado, Morales, & Aguayo (2016)	-	-
3	Barreto & Kalnin (2018)	6	18
3	Mendoza & Ortegon (2019)	1	1
3	Nabaho, Aguti, & Oonyu (2019)	6	1
3	Ortiz & Rúa (2017)	-	-
(1): citations in 14 papers (11 Q1, 3 Q3) **(2): citations in 15 papers** (12 Q1, 3 Q3)		**Subtotal:** 70 72	
		Total: 142 citations	

Source: Made by authors.

Two polar conceptions: quality *en soi* and quality *pour soi*[1]

As was already discussed, there is a great variety of discourses that employ and define the concept of *quality*, but not all are converge nor refer to the same thing (Harvey & Green, 1993; Toranzos, 1996; Weenink et al., 2018). Half century ago, Kripke showed that naming and describing are not synonyms, because "when describing, predicative elements about the object named are enunciated, but […] names do not have their own sense" (Cárdenas-Marín, 2016, pp. 116-117). This refers to what, in the middle of last century, in a posthumous book, Wittgenstein (2017) called "familiar similarities": although it is pretended that there are essential characteristics common to the things bearing a same designation, what they have in common is, in rigor, a set of superimposed similarities.

Once these considerations have been assumed, a careful reading of the 186 papers selected in the penultimate phase of the literature review enabled inferring that the great majority of them may be arranged in two great groups: (i) those that develop a conception —that may be qualified as "quality *en soi*"— of the notion of *quality of higher education* theoretically or empirically supported and valid for practically any institutional context; (ii) those that, in attention to the markedly subjective nature of this notion, discard the pertinence of searching for a unique definition, in the framework of a type of conception qualified here as "quality *pour soi*".

On the other hand, in a literature review of papers written in Spanish focused on the quality of education (Acevedo, 2008), it was determined that two of them, besides being very influential in the academic production immediately after their publication, resulted representative of polar positions about this topic. These are the papers "The quality of education: axes for its definition and evaluation", of the Argentinian sociologist Inés Aguerrondo (1993), and "The construction of quality educational programs", of Pedro Municio (2005) from Madrid. Although it is little probable that much authors of the papers that emerged from the review conducted here have read any of those two papers —among other reasons, because 80 % of the journals reviewed are anglophone—, the paper by Aguerrondo (1993) may be anyway considered a precedent in the first of the two aforementioned groups (that includes the works that tacitly assume an "*en soi*" conception of quality of higher education), while it is valid to consider that the paper by Municio (2005) is a clear precedent of the second group, whose works are characterized by a "*pour soi*" conception of quality.

Aguerrondo (1993) bases her argumentative development on the consideration of quality as a complex and multidimensional concept applicable to any aspect of the field of education —learnings, teachers, infrastructure, processes— and which governs the decision-making in such field. Since it is a concept that is socially and historically determined, its definition fundamentally arises at every moment and place from the demands that the social system makes to the education. This perspective is reaffirmed in works from diverse backgrounds (i.e., Filippakou, 2011; Lemaitre, 2010; Tedesco, 1987), as well as in many of the papers that were selected after the literature review conducted (i.e., Nabaho et al., 2019; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016; Scharager, 2018) and in others published prior to the period considered in the review (i.e., Kleijnen et al., 2013; Rosa et al., 2012; Thune, 1996). For example, Prisacariu & Shah (2016) highlight that the concept of *quality of higher education* largely exceeds the eventual satisfaction of the players involved and, in any case, have important political implications. They state that, in such construct, this concept is never neutral and its meaning is always contextual. Indeed, in any definition of quality of higher education it tacitly underlies an idea about higher education, its fundamental nature, purposes and processes. This results most self-evident in those works that define quality in higher education as "*fitness for purpose*", the mostly used of the five perspectives proposed by Harvey y Green (1993); it is a pragmatic perspective that is generally applied for the control of educational processes and systems, meanwhile processes are often associated to political aspirations of national governments with the purpose of encouraging the work of organizations of the sector in a highly competitive market (Cheng, 2017; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016) and, often furtively, favor the disciplining of people under the prevailing development model (Arce, 2020).

The theoretical position of Municio (2005) is not opposed in all its terms to the previously outlined one, but it presents substantive differences. Its axial statement is that "there is no "thing" called quality, […] but whatever is quality will be defined by the recipient of the object or service" (p. 488). In other words, it considers that quality is not, *sensu stricto*, an attribute or feature inherent to a product or a service, but rather a value (an attribute or feature) assigned by its recipient and which will depend on the degree in which such product or service contributes to fulfill his/her needs, interests, demands or expectations. This approach is also widely accepted in the academic production that emerged from the literature review conducted, both explicitly (i.e., Cardoso et al., 2016; Cardoso et al., 2018; Dicker et al., 2019; Mendoza & Ortegón, 2019, among

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others) and implicitly (i.e., Mukwambo, 2019). For example, Mendoza and Ortegón (2019) consider that *quality* is a subjective concept in the field of higher education, susceptible of multiple definitions and assessments, which is evident in the fact that the aspects considered key for quality differ notably between students and teachers. In a large number of the academic production of the last three decades (i.e., Cheng, 2011, 2012; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Kalayci et al., 2012; Lomas, 2002, 2007; Newton, 2002; Sarrico et al., 2010; Schindler et al., 2015; Watty, 2005, 2006), including many of the ones selected in the review presented here (i.e., Avci, 2017; Dicker et al., 2019; Prisacariu y Shah, 2016; Scharager, 2018), it is emphasized that there are as many definitions of *quality of higher education* as there are categories of the players directly involved, either in the educational center of interest (students, teachers, managers, non-teaching staff) or external to it (funding or sponsor organizations, alumni, employers). Similarly, in some of those works (i.e., Avci, 2017; Dicker et al., 2019) it is pointed out, in accordance with what is exposed by Municio (2005), that the adoption of particular definitions of *quality*, besides not always being coincident inside each of those categories, depends on the circumstances prevailing at each moment and place.

Although Aguerrondo (1993) and Municio (2005), just like the great majority of the papers selected in the review conducted, coincide that quality is a concept socially determined and hence susceptible of multiple definitions, for Aguerrondo (1993), as it was already stated, they fundamentally emerge from what the social system demands to education —social determination is projected from the social system towards education, one of the subsystems, while for Municio (2005) they emerge from the user –social determination emanates from the recipient of the educational product or service—. In the first case, the concept of *quality* —its conceptual construction, definition and characterization— is conceived from *the political view* in a traditional sense and, in the specific case of Aguerrondo, with a notorious neo-Marxist stamp; in the second, *politics* is conceived according to a more updated version, in consonance with what seems to be estimated, at least in this part of the world, as "politically correct".

Each of these forms of conceptualizing quality results in the adoption of distinctive analysis units. In the first, these are often institutional agents: government offices that rule educational subsystems (especially through its expression in official documents), their technical advisors (in many cases, supranational experts), management teams (both at insti-

tutional and organizational scale) and, more infrequently, funding and sponsoring organisms. Many of the papers selected in the conducted review share this position (i.e., Cheng, 2017; Nabaho et al., 2019; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016). In the second case the studies are focused on analysis units constituted by different groups of players directly or indirectly involved in the organizational dynamics of an educational center: students, teachers, alumni, potential employers (of alumni and advanced students). Many studies aligned with this view were also identified in the review conducted (i.e., Avci, 2017; Cardoso et al., 2016; Cardoso et al., 2018; Dicker et al., 2019; Mendoza & Ortegón, 2019; Mukwambo, 2019; Scharager, 2018).

Based on this, those who, as Municio (2005), align around a "*pour soi*" conception of quality, are focused on the analysis of quality along the process followed by an educational program, with emphasis on its results and effects, whereas those who, as Aguerrondo (1993), are inclined towards an "*en soi*" conception of quality, assume a perspective that privileges systemic studies focused on educational policies and on the ideological and pedagogical options assumed by planners and decision-makers. This vision is shared by authors of different geographical and discipline origin (i.e., Lemaitre, 2010; Nabaho et al. (2019); Prisacariu & Shah, 2016; Weenink et al., 2018). Aguerrondo (1993) argues that there is quality where there is coexistence between the current general political project and the implemented educational project or, more concretely, "among [its] fundamental axes (ideological, political, pedagogical, etc.) and the organization (or the phenomenal appearance) of the educational apparatus" (p. 5). Thus, in this perspective, the political and ideological definitions are the ones that establish the scales for evaluation of quality, whether of an educational system, a school organization or a pedagogical proposal.

Therefore, in its implied connotations and in all that can be inferred from them, lies the main divergence plane with the perspective of Municio (2005), for whom it is of little importance the nature, validity or consistence of the ideological and political definitions (or even technical) that have taken part in the gestation of the educational product or service, nor the effectiveness of efficiency features attributed to them. From this perspective, achieving quality does not depend on the degree in which the educational service or product fulfills the objectives established by its creators —its efficacy— nor lies in the extent to which its production process has optimized the resources available —its efficiency—, but rather the degree in which such product or service contributes to fulfill the needs of its recipients (or users, consumers or clients, depending on

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the case). If the latter are in charge of determining if a product or service has quality, then its evaluation should not be made in terms of efficacy or efficiency, but in terms of "effectiveness, value and satisfaction" (Municio, 2005, p. 493). Then, there is quality if the educational product or service fulfills the objectives established by its creators —in consonance with the "*fitness for purpose*" perspective referred to by Harvey and Green (1993) and, according to what emerged from the review conducted, adopted by the great majority of the main experts about the topic—, but as long as such objectives are oriented to fulfill the needs, interests, demands or expectations of its recipient (or users, consumers or clients)

Thus, in opposition to the paradigm that defines quality as a function of the presence of attributes inherent to the educational product or service —its internal quality, according to the expression proposed by him — (definition aligned with the perspectives of "*quality as excellence*" and of "*quality as consistence or as perfection*" referred to by Harvey & Green, 1993), Municio (2005) vindicates a definition focused on the assessment of its consumers —its external quality—, constructed based on the distance perceived by them between their initial expectations and the degree of satisfaction achieved with the received product or service. In sum, even though the educational product or service results excellent in terms of efficiency and efficacy, that does not guarantee its quality in a full sense, which will be only achieved when the effects produced in its users are estimated by them as satisfactory or valuable. In a way, this positioning is aligned with the one exposed by Michel de Certeau (2000) in other discipline and thematic realm: "a model is not judged by its tests, but by the effects that it produces on the interpretation" (p. 150)

As a conclusion, an alternative position: *quality pour qui*[2]

Definitely, who should define, determine or evaluate the quality of a system, program, product or service in higher education? To decision-makers advised by experts, would respond Aguerrondo (1993); to its user or consumers, would reply Municio (2005). Let us consider, for a moment, that in terms of pertinence, viability and consistence or convenience, the response by Municio (2005) is acceptable: "whatever quality is will be defined by the recipient of the object or service" (p. 488). In that case, in which way could a consumer define the quality of the educational product or service that he/she consumes? In which way all consumers of a category of product or service could determine its quality? Is it esta-

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blished (or inferred) by the mere fact of acquiring and consuming it? Are the consumers in conditions —situational, intellectual and corporate, among others— of determining consensual parameters for defining and evaluating the quality of an educational product or service? Even more relevant: if so, is it really required that planners and decision-makers are adjusted to such definitions and determinations? Would that be a valid and pertinent adjustment? Would it be technically consistent and politically convenient?

The first two questions of the preceding paragraph, of intentionally rhetoric nature, invoke instrumental objections. The responses to the remaining questions, which imply objections referred to the practical sense —understood with the meaning attributed by Bourdieu (1990) in his book entitled, precisely, *Le sens pratique*— and are biased to the technical and political relevance, are, or should be, strongly negative. In most of the current world, the fundamental guidelines of higher education are a matter of State. It should not be conceived the creation and implementation of educational products and services apart from of educational public policies, and much less delegating the definition of their quality to their consumers or, much less, taking what they consider as quality as a central input of some educational plan, program, service or product. The goods of education, crucial field in any social system, should not be equated to any other good that participates in the logics of the market.

However, according to what is established by Municio (2014), the fundamental principle of quality, accepted unanimously by experts in quality and entities that establish quality standards and/or certifications, is the orientation to the client. In their opinion, any institution must center their management in the client, and all product or service should be oriented to the satisfaction of his/her needs. On the contrary, we insist, this should not be strictly like this in the field of education. In this field, the needs should be established by the social systems in its entirety –specifically, the citizens (among which, the players of education are obviously included)–, which, according to the constitutional regulations that govern our social life, delegates such setting to the competent bodies of the State.

From the preceding argument it should not be inferred that education, by pursuing the maximum quality of its components, should not take into consideration the demand of the involved social sectors, nor paying the proper attention to the degree of satisfaction of the users of educational products and services. But it should not be exhausted in it. In any case, it could be admitted that any educational product or service must be oriented to the satisfaction of needs, but as long as it is not about

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the needs exclusively sensed, perceived or expressed by users, but also of those that the people responsible of the design of educational policies —meanwhile socially, politically and technically legitimated— consider convenient to satisfy. This is the only sense that should be attributed to the orientation to the client defended by Municio (2005).

To this respect, our position is closer to the one exposed by Aguerrondo (1993):

> An efficient educational system is that which provides the best education possible to the greatest number of people. Then, it is constituted at an instrumental level: it depends on […] how it is defined, in the political and technical instance, what is 'best education' (p. 3).

Thus, it is clear that the definition of quality of education —"the best education"— corresponds to "the political-technical instance", this is, to the field of action of the agents to which the citizens attribute the obligation, the authority and the competence to define the educational policies and make decisions. In any case, the citizens directly or indirectly involved or affected by the so defined educational policies have their own spaces and instances —and if it is not this way, they should conquer them— for the eventual rejection or questioning of them. As it happens with many others issues that emerge from (or are installed in) the social life of republican States with formal democracy and semi-representative constitution, a good part of the conflicts are resolved according to the mobilization and pressure capacity of the organized social groups, whether it is about, in the case of the educational field, teachers, students or their families.

It is pertinent to make a clarification exclusive for the Uruguayan case (and, with some nuances of difference, also for the Argentinian case). Inalienable principles of institutional autonomy and of the co-government by university students, teachers and alumni, rule in the public university education in Uruguay; these principles were established by the Organic Law of the University, in force since 1958. In this case, in front of the question posed at the beginning of this section: who should define, determine or evaluate the quality of the educational system?, the response is unique and unequivocal: to the decision-makers, who are also its users and consumers. The star players of the Uruguayan public university system —students, teachers and alumni— are also the main agents of change, according to a representation system very consensually agreed and widely legitimated and accepted.

In any case, it is necessary the adoption of an unequivocal and precise definition of the notion of *quality of higher education*, as part of the

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starting horizon of every design of integral educative plans or programs, both at the institutional and organizational levels, as well as of any system projected for the evaluation of existing plans and programs. But this is not the only necessary definition. It should be added the responses to two questions formulated by Blanco and Berger (2014) and reaffirmed by Marshall (2016): who define the criteria to be included in such definition? Who benefit from the different existing definitions of quality?

In agreement with this type of statement, the manifestly pragmatic interest underlying the present text is expressed in a mostly political perspective that is apart both from the "*en soi*" and "*pour soi*" conceptions. On one hand, because the essentialist conceptions, that our epistemological positioning discards, contribute nothing in political, of transforming action or praxis terms. On the other hand, because the merely subjectivist conceptions inhibit the possibilities of transforming planning, programming or projection. Then, the "*en soi*" and "*pour soi*" conceptions should be relegated, and substituted by a "*pour qui*" conception of quality in higher education: quality for whom.

Limitations and potential continuity lines

Although the literature review was conducted with the maximum rigor and exhaustivity (a starting universe of 53,290 papers published in the 2016-2020 period in a total of 1272 journals, adding also 80 texts of "gray literature"), two limitations may be pointed out.

A first limitation lies on the fact that the review was exclusively restricted to papers published in journals indexed in the 2019 *Scimago Journal Rank* (even though it is an indexing base very recognized in the international scientific context).

Another limitation, of rather partial nature, is that the period of time considered in the review (2016-2020) does not enable directly knowing and evaluating the theoretical and semantic derivation of the notion of *quality of higher education* from its establishment in the "hidden agenda" of the international scientific community —towards the 1980s— to the present.

The most immediate continuity lines of the literature review conducted, which would complete the integral state of the art about the matter addressed, correspond to the analysis and discussion of the results that were excluded from the present text, already enunciated at the beginning of its third section: the components or standards mostly used for evaluat-

ing the quality of higher education and the correlation between the type of conception of quality of higher education and the empirical strategy adopted for determining it, including the predominant analysis units.

Notes

1   Here the expressions "*en soi*" and "*pour soi*" are maintained in their original spelling taken from the French language, since they do not admit a precise translation that simultaneously preserves their epistemological connotations. Based on a referral to distinctions typical of the post-Socratic Greek philosophy and of the Kantian philosophy, the expression "quality *en soi*" makes reference to objectivistic positions, those that consider that "things" have an essence (the noumenon, the thing-in-itself), whose existence is independent of our capacity to perceive it and, thereby, of any form of sensible intuition or of representation. In contrast, the expression "quality *pour soi*", refers to subjectivistic positions, among which there are the phenomenological ones that reject that "things" have an essence and that postulate, grossly said, that the world is the phenomenal world; the apparent world, the world sensitively intuited, perceived, represented (Acevedo, 2008). Conceived this way, "quality *en soi*" and "quality *pour soi*" are polar notions, contrasting. Their existence in a pure form is highly improbable, but result useful to differentiate the epistemological positions that, regarding higher education, present clear affinities with one or other of these notions.

2   The literal translation of the expression "*pour qui*", taken from the French language, is "for whom". In the context of the discursive development of this text, the use of the expression "*pour qui*", without translation and applied to the concept of *quality*, responds to the intention of promoting in the reader its contrasting with the expressions "quality *en soi*" and "quality *pour soi*".

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