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Research quality and capabilities in social sciences in the mexican context

Author: Research quality and capabilities in social science **Education** can context

Since late last century, evaluation as a resource to achieve educational quality was implemented as an education policy in Latin America. In Mexico, its effects were imposed throughout its education system, and higher education was no exception. Currently, there is an over-evaluation of the system, which not only measures, discovers, and diagnoses academic conditions and outcomes, but prescribes what and how things should be done in a recessive economic framework. This kind of environment limits the allocation of financial resources to certain areas and issues, imposing an efficiency-oriented and pragmatic rationality. In institutions of higher education, research and the work of its creators have been disrupted by a control logic that inhibits their abilities; this objectifies them in a regulatory framework that establishes a quality concept in terms of their productivity, which is assessed under standards that denature the work of the researcher and the specificity of social knowledge at the expense of the quality of life, health, and research itself. This article aims to reflect on this subject.

Keywords: Research, evaluation, quality, capabilities.



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## Research Article

### RESEARCH QUALITY AND CAPABILITIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES IN THE MEXICAN CONTEXT

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#### ABSTRACT

Since late last century, evaluation as a resource to achieve educational quality was implemented as an education policy in Latin America. In Mexico, its effects were imposed throughout its education system, and higher education was no exception. Currently, there is an over-evaluation of the system, which not only measures, discovers, and diagnoses academic conditions and outcomes, but prescribes what and how things should be done in a recessive economic framework. This kind of environment limits the allocation of financial resources to certain areas and issues, imposing an efficiency-oriented and pragmatic rationality. In institutions of higher education, research and the work of its creators have been disrupted by a control logic that inhibits their abilities; this objectifies them in a regulatory framework that establishes a quality concept in terms of their productivity, which is assessed under standards that denature the work of the researcher and the specificity of social knowledge at the expense of the quality of life, health, and research itself. This article aims to reflect on this subject.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Problem Statement

Since late last century, evaluation quality has been a global tendency “in accordance with the Neoliberal model [...] [concerned] about achieving the highest efficiency in the use of public resources” (González & Aryarza, 1997, p. 368). Its effects have impacted institutions of higher education (IHE) in general, including Mexican ones. Public policies focus on evaluations based on a set of indicators that establish what should be done, how it should be done, and the time to achieve it, as well as the institutionalization of prizes and incentives for IHE and their researchers, as long as their outputs meet the imposed standards.

The evaluation and indicators that guide and regulate academic work are mechanisms imported from a private company logic; this entails a rationality that specifies research methods, topics, and completion times, even at the expense of the researchers' health due to the pressure and pace of performance. In addition, researchers sometimes opt to feign and modify data or results in their research work in order to maintain the expected productivity indicators for publication.

Particularly with regard to publication, there are journals that are part of the most prestigious indexes that encourage high rejection rates of the articles submitted by scholars, triggering a

state of permanent stress on them. Such practices are contrary to the nature of social research, whose main characteristic is to always be in evolution and in constant deperation; therefore, it is difficult to meet the standards under those parameters because they demand effort and personal sacrifice from the researchers.

### High-Quality Research and Academic Evaluation

The term “quality”, which originates from the field of industrial production, establishes standards and measurements that are not applicable to academic groups, where standardization is complex, especially in areas of innovation and improvement that depend on research, outreach, academy, and management (González & Aryarza, 1997). This is in addition to the lack of clarity when identifying the client or recipient of the products of social research.

In the current economic conditions faced by IHE, which are subject to budget cuts and forced to prioritize certain research topics, institutions are under pressure to obtain income. For this reason, they lead their research into a new direction in order to achieve the profitability of academic activities. In this sense, certification and evaluation are designed, among other purposes, to encourage valuable research.

Academic work has been modified since “the generalization of new evaluation practices associated with productivity, [...] are expressed in a financial compensation for those who are

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‘favorably assessed’ under these systems and are part of a new element of ‘academic prestige’” (Díaz, 1996, p. 409). Prestige within the academic community involves a symbolic factor that has an impact on two aspects: on economic motivation and on the generation of permanent stress in order to meet the required quality standards.

In terms of client satisfaction, it is not clear who the client is in research. In Mexico, assessing organizations may include the National System of Researchers, the National Council of Science and Technology, the Teacher Professional Development Program, as well as university commissions, society, or, as in the case of applied research, companies. Similarly, the measurement index is not clear either, nor if the client should be the journal, the amount of citations, or the social purpose (Guízar & Rueda, 2016, p. 1). In addition, there is a myth rationalized with impact: it is believed that being in the Elsevier and Scopus indexes means doing high-quality research. It is worth mentioning that Latin-American journals are marginalized from said indexes.

The National Council of Science and Technology (CONACyT) is the organization responsible for the creation of science and technology policies in Mexico. Particularly in Area V, Social Sciences, it establishes among its quality criteria in the evaluation for joining or rejoining to the National System of Researchers, the publication of research results in articles on indexed international journals and, in the case of national journals, on ones that are listed on the register of said Council; as well as the publication of books and chapters in books by renowned publishing houses, without mentioning which ones are prestigious and which ones are not (CONACyT, 2015).

CONACyT, just like other assessing authorities, both internal and external to the researcher’s affiliated institution, values the prestige-international prestige in particular-in terms of the acceptance rate of the journal (Fonseca-Mora & Aguaded, 2014) or the publishing company. In the end, the responsibility of one of the main elements of evaluation falls on the strategies and acceptance rate of the journals and publishing companies behind the publication and dissemination of the products of scientific research.

The relation between research quality and capability is so close that, according to Morales (2013), research capabilities are understood as the ability to generate and disseminate knowledge. The most appropriate place for said dissemination is in journals where its impact can be measured with bibliometric indicators. The problem is that the conditions for developing research capabilities are not always the most suitable.

The areas of negotiation and power between assessing organizations have modified the relation of power among the policies of IHE, as external mechanisms beyond the academy and universities (Beltrán & García, 2013). There are ethically dubious effects among the harmful impacts caused by econometric indicators because technical rationality is used in order to comply with them (Buendía, 2013). Understanding research quality in terms of the amount of citations does not necessarily denote content quality since the real impact should have to be valued not only in terms of the scientific community, but also in the use of the contents by society (Alperin, 2015).

Furthermore, there is a hegemonic perspective toward the use of the English language in publications; that is, it seems that writing articles in English is an indicator of quality, which has nothing to do with the content itself. For certain disciplines and institutions, it is only allowed to publish under the WoSindex, implying that we are excluding ourselves (Cantoral, 2015). Reed Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Sage, and Wiley are companies that generated, only in 2011, “9.4 billion dollars in revenue and published nearly 1.8 million articles with a profit margin of 20 and 30 percent for the publishing houses (SciELO, 2013)” (Guízar & Rueda, 2016, p. 5).

With this fact, it is emphasized that there is more of an economic interest-even more than a scientific or academic one-rather than an interest in the researcher and their products. Likewise, the subjective elements surrounding the concept of quality of an intellectual product must be considered in terms of where it is published, its impact rate or prestige, and “from the point of view of the journal editors’ experience (Siguan, 2002), the reviewer’s experience (Bobenrieth, 2002), and the researcher’s perspective (Sternberg, 2002, 2003), based on the connection between science and politics (Polaino, 2002) or in relation to the system of scientific production” (Buela-Casal, 2003, p. 24).

In view of the foregoing, we are facing practices that fade the researchers as human beings and transform them into simple machines that generate products in order to achieve a supposed quality. The researchers’ capabilities are being suppressed, and they are being objectified in this regulatory framework, overdimensioned by evaluation. The objective of this article is to reflect on this subject.

It is necessary to place human beings as the main focus and not their products. If this trend continues, as Nussbaum said, “nations all over the world [...] will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements”(2012, p. 20).

According to Nussbaum (2015), the State’s duty and fundamental task toward its citizens is to ensure-using all means at its disposal-that people are able to live a dignified and prosperous life, above the minimum requirements, from what she calls “central capabilities”. These can be understood as what a person is able to do and be, or as Sen refers as “substantive freedoms”, which are defined as a group of opportunities that are related to each other and to the social, politic, and economic environment so that a person is able to choose and act freely and feasibly.

For Nussbaum (2015), these capabilities are, among others: being able to live a prolonged life with dignity, guaranteeing to move freely from place to place, without fear of violence. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason, in a truly human way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education. Being able to not having one’s emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. Three of the capabilities directly related to this research are: being able to have good health, to be adequately nourished, and to have adequate shelter; being able to engage in various forms of social interaction and recreational activities with family and loved ones; and “being able to work as a human being,

exercising practical reason, and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers” (Nussbaum, 2015, p. 55).

As a consequence, quality transforms the person into a productive individual with values closely related to the market and to econometric indicators instead of human values. This, which could be considered as a cognitive dissonance, implies that the physiological system diagnoses an internal adjustment that could cause physical illnesses as a result of the contradiction between the researcher’s desires and principles and the institution’s necessity to be a productive entity in quantity.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed for this research was both quantitative and qualitative. The tool selected for gathering information was an electronic form specially designed for this purpose and provided to researchers from Mexico via Google Drive; the answers from 17 of them were retrieved. They were questioned on diverse variables and categories related to research quality, health dimensions, and personal life, as well as stress and other issues originated from work. The form was sent to CONACyT research centers located in Mexico and to five postgraduate programs from the following disciplines: Mathematics, Social Sciences, Administrative Sciences, and Humanities. The institutions of these programs are not identified for ethical reasons.

In a subsequent research under the project titled “Evaluation of the Teaching Body Quality in Mexican and Spanish Universities”, by the Research Network for the Study of

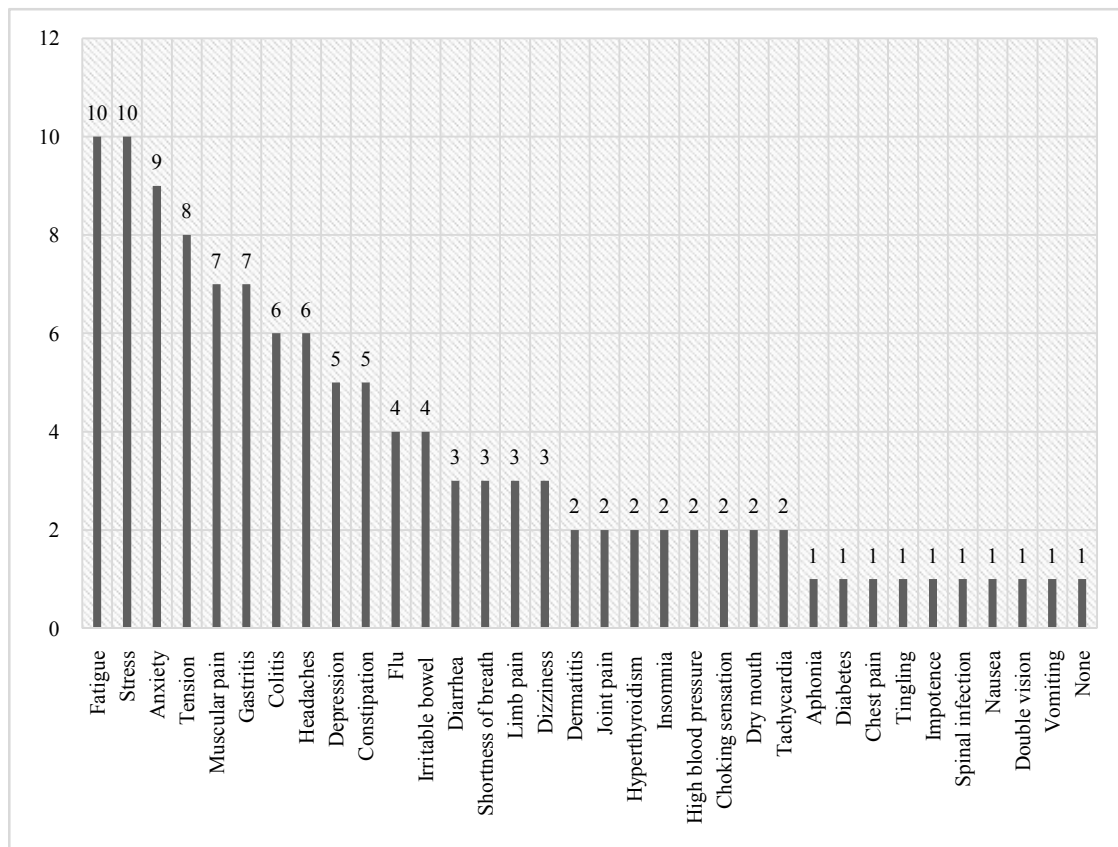
Integrity and Educational Quality (RIEICA), financed by PRODEP-SEP (the Teacher Professional Development Program by the Secretary of Public Education of Mexico), 2015-2016, a group of 20 teachers-researchers were interrogated. Said researchers work in diverse postgraduate educational programs registered in CONACyT’s National Postgraduate Quality Programs (PNPC). They were questioned about what values-related training is promoted in the postgraduate programs where they collaborate, scientific objectivity, main questionable academic practices, and their subjective interpretations. During the interviews, the teachers emphasized other factors for analysis such as time, quality of intellectual products, and the way how pressure and work overflow change and affect personal and family relationships. The obtained results were very similar to the results from the online survey.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the answers provided by the 17 researchers, who have undergone different types of evaluations by multiple assessing organizations for either keeping or increasing a certain level of income and/or professional prestige, the following data was obtained, as shown in graph No. 1 below.

### Symptoms

As it can be observed in the graph, only one of the surveyed individuals indicated that they have not had any kind of health issue during evaluation periods. It seems that the imposed quality standards and the budget cuts allocated to research development at IHE have promoted a highly competitive work environment and an individualistic organizational culture



Graph 1 Evaluation-stress-illnesses relation

originated by encouraging a type of motivation that favors economic incentives over human values.

In addition to the diversity of what each researcher considers as research quality, the evaluation processes they undergo are ambiguous since academic quality cannot be standardized like in the production of material goods. Therefore, products often depend on the subjective interpretation of institutions, power groups within assessing organizations, and the researchers themselves, who establish and prioritize personal or group criteria in each area of knowledge, as shown below. The following table was prepared based on a survey on what research quality means for each one of the scholars.

**Table 1** Research quality according to scholars

Sociology of Education	A research resulting from an extensive review of sources that addresses a relevant and innovative topic, guided under an ethical criterion. In addition, a research that contributes new perspectives to the discipline, the object of study, or the way of approaching it, and one that, instead of being conclusive, breaks new ground that enriches knowledge.
Sociology	A high-quality scientific text is one on which the results of the research are presented disclosing the theories and methods that support the response given, in accordance with the research findings, always guided by explicit methods.
Mathematics	Quality criteria vary over time. Quality standards are imposed by the scientific community itself (those who produce, not those who assess) through acceptance criteria for books, essays or conferences. Those who produce do not worry about quality standards, their work reflects them.
Organizational Studies	Initially, quality is associated with the value of the knowledge the research presents. Secondly, it is associated with the process the research establishes, where each step of its method is clearly explained, as well as the inferences derived from the results and their value in the research area in question.
Social Sciences	To link the reality of the phenomena that occur in real life and to give a specific explanation within a theoretical and methodological framework.
Organizational Studies	Description of the methodology used, which should be up-to-date, methodologically consistent (it should reflect the accomplishment of the research objective), and scientifically arbitrated.
Social Sciences	To be very aware of the phenomenon that is going to be studied, analyzed, understood, and explained; and to build the object of study for such purpose that includes variables and categories that guide the research. A high-quality research is one that will provide knowledge about its object of study that will imply new ways of approaching said phenomenon. The scope of the research will depend on the resources available.
Social Sciences and Humanities	There is no specific definition for quality in the field of knowledge because what is excellent for some might not be important for others. Quality itself, in terms of knowledge, is not applicable because it is intangible. For readers and the field of knowledge, a research should be rich in terms of the topic it is developing, innovative, and should attract other researchers to analyze it under different perspectives.
Social Anthropology	A research that is relevant in academic and social terms; that is, a research that provides useful and relatively innovative and critical knowledge. A research that helps to imagine new and different ways of questioning pressing issues in order to contribute to the creation of conditions so that groups involved in those issues participate in decision-making and, eventually, contribute to the implementation of those decisions.
History	A well-supported, solid research with: an appropriate methodology adapted to the object of study, supported by a first-hand, comprehensive documentation work; prudent use of relevant bibliography [...]; rigorous, reflexive and critical use of the original documentation [...]; a clear expression of how it is connected, divergently or continually, with the interpretive tradition in its field of study (State of the Art); an original contribution, either methodological or thematic, contrasted with the latest contribution to the field of study; an in-depth discussion of the subject explored; and an appropriate written expression of the research results.
Social Sciences	It is a contribution to science with methodological and theoretical rigor that involves the systematization of ideas and the review of specialized work in a specific field.

The interpretation of quality may depend on many factors such as the academic field, the training school, and the predominant theoretical and methodological tendencies of the institution. Thus, there are researchers who establish that a theoretical argument is essential, while others believe an empirical approach with a more phenomenological focus designates higher quality than an object built theoretically.

On the other hand, one of the scarcest resources, in terms of the relation between academic production and the generation of value, is time. This implies that there is not enough time to produce in better conditions under the quality and quantity expected by assessing organizations. One of the surveyed scholars stated the following:

[...] the system is very baroque, [...] it is not made for quality. [...] it would need less [...] indicators, to specify the concept of quality, and to give time and space to get to know the areas where we work. [...] It is feasible it also needs resources. It is feasible, indeed, but that is the less important part since there

are students who work really well as collaborators. I believe the salary I earn, with incentives (if they were cut) or without them, would allow me to live well and I could devote myself to research calmly and make relevant and better-quality work. However, since we are in a system where standards are somewhere else, where the people who set these productivity standards have already gone through said conditions and they can afford to not create content because they have a base of students who produce for them [...] they are exploitation models [...] that tend to be generalized.

Undoubtedly, there is a side effect related to their personal care, family relationships, and life quality in general.

Maintaining the demanded levels of academic productivity disrupts and reduces leisure time, rest, and family activities. Even the expected research quality is deteriorated due to the fast pace imposed by the compliance with the institutional commitments they have undertaken.

The researchers were questioned if they are affected-and how-by working times and pressures they devote to their work performance in order to comply with the institutional requirements that allow them to keep their academic productivity standards in relation to their personal and private life. The following testimonies were retrieved:

I spend a lot of time on meeting the requirements for scientific products. In my personal life, this affects my health (eyes and back). I have little time to exercise and eat healthily. In my family life, I sometimes do not attend events because I have to comply with academic obligations.

Unfortunately, these are “at-all-times” postgraduate studies. A day only has 24 hours, and the reading requirements [...] are

extreme [...] not sleeping becomes a habit, as well as eating at irregular times, and managing high-stress levels in order to please the [...] evaluating bodies.

This notably has an impact on me in many ways since it limits family time and other activities that, even if they are complementary, enhance the integral development of a person. This impairment does not only affect a researcher's personal life; the workload, paces, and demands imposed damage research quality.

[...] it reduces the time for social life [...] the researcher's ability to develop and set goals in their personal life. [...] It reduces the ability to create social relationships outside of work. All of this, among other reasons, due to the quantitative design of assessing systems.

The pressure for increasing the so-called [academic] productivity led me to use part of my personal and family time to make progress in my research. It also made me feel less calm when relaxing and spending time with my family and friends outside of work.

## CONCLUSION

Assessing research quality in Social Sciences in Mexico and other countries usually falls on journals, publishing houses, and their reviewers. In this sense, access to incentives and prestige depends on the quantity of products published by said agencies. The literature and the surveyed researchers consider that the concept of research quality must be rebuilt and that the evaluation system has to be reformed.

It should be mentioned that a relationship between quality, system production in terms of quantity, stress, and time has been established. The evaluation mechanisms have been able to modify the researchers' way of working, creating a specific way of seeing the world, developing self-evaluation systems, and seeking for an economic status and social prestige inside academic groups. Certainly, the system is not designed to develop the researcher's capabilities.

Researchers have presented a series of health disorders as a result of reducing time in other areas of their lives due to internal and external institutional pressure. The palliatives that could help to improve quality life, such as social and family relations among other symbolic systems that improve physical and mental health, have been ignored and neglected in order to meet the standards that guarantee a better remuneration and/or higher academic prestige. The longer the time dedicated to research, the greater the social division, and the lower the quality of physical and emotional life.

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