Caribbean Conference on Higher Education

April 11-13, 2010 - Paramaribo, Suriname

Evaluation and Accreditation in Latin America: from national to regional experiences

By Guillermo Vargas-Salazar

President of RIACES

Our time is perhaps the most exciting and critical period in the history of mankind. Never before has such a whirlwind transformation has permeated so deeply, so globally and so intensely all the nuances of our lives.

To this situation has certainly contributed the overwhelming technological revolution that affects us all, not only for its obvious implications for the creation of new conditions of human transformation of the universe, but also because of its implications in the creation of an emerging new society characterized not only by information and technology, but, above all, by knowledge and communication

The huge transformations that we live in our world today, as a result of the advances in science and technology and as a result of the rapid advance of knowledge, is with no doubt a great challenge for university higher education institutions which – as a consequence of their own nature - are now more than ever called to respond comprehensively to these profound transformations, visualize the future with the challenges it brings and raise new and effective options to tackle it is built on well-being of our societies

Thus, both the global transformations of the international order, and thereorganization of the world economies around the value of technology and globalization with their share of profits and with their heavy loads of inequity and exclusion, have been targeted to educational systems and in particular to higher education institutions because it is there where lies - as well as in other institutions, but more than others - the responsibility of becoming decisive stages in order to face the challenge of our era and transforming uncertainty and fear into hope.

With no doubt, the picture of the world we face is complex and our job as academics is immense, for it is that today we are not just living one of those periodic economic crises of the capitalist model of development, but what we face is the rapid emergence of new forms of social organization, both economic and political, what we are living is a structural crisis marked by the simultaneity of the operational difficulties in the institutions responsible for social cohesion in the relations between economy and society and the methods of formation of individual and collective identities, we are facing the emergence of a new social organization in which knowledge and information are struggling hard, and successfully, to replace natural resources and money as key variables in the generation and distribution of power in society .

Moreover, in the field of higher education and in response to growing demand and the insufficient supply of university studies, which had been usually provided by the so called "traditional universities", there has been a rapid and enormous quantitative growth of universities, some of them of enviable quality and academic rigor, others with its academic nature partially crippled by not being multidisciplinary, or by not having enough space and resources for research as a substantial part of the university, or by having a lack of conditions for real participation decisions of all members the university community and, finally, other unfortunate institutions outside the main and esential university interest and commitment to quality, oriented only by a desire for profit, with massive ranks of dubious professional training and with a weak bond with the requirements of our developing societies.

As a result of these new circumstances there has been a recent growing concern about how societies can and must ensure the quality of education and with it, a unique participatory and active interest in the construction and experience of a culture of quality and assessment that goes beyond the purely academic and incorporates multiple stakeholders: students, teachers, researchers, university authorities, parents, employers, users of professional services, and professional organizations, national governments, international agencies and supranational organizations.

This social concern and this particular interest - unheard of in its growing force, in the consequences of its impact and in the amount and variety of actors who partake of them - meet at least three closely related factors that are unique to our time: the phenomenon of globalization, the emergence of the knowledge society and the significant transformation of the higher education system. In all cases, in our region, the main effort is consistent with what is stated in the Declaration of the Regional Conference on Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean 2008, this is the purpose of setting "... *a scenario that would facilitate the articulation, in creative and sustainable policies to strengthen the social commitment of higher education, its quality, relevance, and the autonomy of the institutions.*"

Indeed, the social concern, as well as the growing interest and commitment to evaluation and quality assurance in higher education is largely the result of the conviction that our countries can only successfully face globalization by consolidating and strengthen higher education systems of proven quality that entitle its graduates to take advantage of the wealth of possibilities for human development and growth that globalization entails while – at the same time – successfully circumvent the highly competitive and asymmetric components of this phenomenon and also acts as a protective shield for our people against the dangers that globalization entails, such as the possible weakening of the social contract that guarantees and promotes individual and collective social security, social justice and solidarity among men and generations ; the right to work, the right of training in equal opportunities and, eventually, the

fragmentation and rapid impoverishment of our developing countries. Not surprisingly, the Regional Higher Education Conference 2008 warned us:

> "Given the complexity of global challenges, present and future, higher education has a social responsibility to advance our understanding of multifaceted problems with social, economic, scientific and cultural as well as our ability to cope. Higher education must lead the office in terms of creating global knowledge to address global challenges "

This huge challenge that the Regional Conference was referred to the University, only can be achieved through appropriate educational provision, contextualized and based on principles of transparency and excellence that are nurtured with the participation of evaluation and accreditation systems of quality and international networks of accrediting bodies, a situation that, in turn, returned to the World Higher Education Conference held in Paris last July 2009, which is reflected in his final statement when he states that:

> Globalization has highlighted the need to establish national systems of accreditation of studies and quality assurance, and to promote networking among them

No less important as a cause for social concern and indicated particular interest in the quality of higher education, evaluation and accreditation, is the circumstance of an emerging knowledge society in which socio-economic processes take on a new quality knowledge as it becomes the most important production factor and, consequently, does not hide the risk of the emergence of new forms of social injustice and exclusion as related to knowledge, everyone knows that while today's knowledge increases with unusual speed, the knowledge of what we don´t know increases with a speed even more steeply. To avoid these pitfalls, emerges again as an requirement that we can´t

ignore, the need for proven quality education and with it the urgent need for assessment tools, accountability, accreditation and recognition as a stimulus to excellence and quality assurance for, as proclaimed by the World Conference on Higher Education held in Paris in July 2009

> *At no other time in history has been far more important than ensuring the quality of higher education, for being a primary force for building inclusive knowledge societies and diverse, and to promote research, innovation, creativity and development.*

Faced with this multiplicity and gravity of circumstances, it is urgent then that Education in general – and University Higher Education in particular – respond promptly to the requirements of the new society, the demands of the productive sector and the imposition of the scientific and technological transformation that surrounds us. But first and foremost, we must to draw the roads to ensure full respect to the majestic dignity of the human person and his fulfillment, with priority over any other social value. For all that the requirement binding is essential and with no doubt to provide a higher education marked by quality.

This does not mean that the quality has been a surprising or new in the development of higher education institutions, of course not. In contrast, the premise from which we depart is that quality has not been a stranger to the life and work of institutions of higher education, that it is indeed far from it being a new field in the development of the universities, in contrast, the pursuit of academic excellence - by their very nature - has always been an inherent task of the Universities.

The innovative elements in this area are found in a new conception of the quality of education and teaching strategies designed for their development. We have basically migrated from an abstract concept; characterized by its vagueness, focused primarily on the tradition, the prestige and merit, and - because of it - hardly operationalized; to a concrete concept that is based on

the measurement of performance indicators and efficiency of processes, whose procedures are characterized by methodological rigor, both form a quantitative and a qualitative perspective , which makes it possible to grasp the concept of quality of education

The quality education concept - as desire of perfectibility - is more a desideratum, an aspiration, a longing perhaps always unfinished and endless, an ideal to which we aspire, which only by successive approximations, it is possible asymptotically approach. The notion of quality of education is a complex and constantly evolving concept which is built on multiple and various references and is regarded as the perfectibility space between being and should be.

With this new concept in hand is how we are now committed to face the significant transformation that the system of Higher Education has suffered in recent years, mainly because of the unusual increase in the demand for university studies and the consequent excessive quantitative expansion of these services. On this matter the Paris World Higher Education Conference, in its final communiqué, explicitly raises the urgency to have systems devoted to ensure the quality of university education programs:

> *Expanded access is a challenge to the quality of higher education. Quality assurance is an essential function in contemporary higher education and should involve all stakeholders. It is a task that requires both the implementation of systems to ensure quality and standards of evaluation and promotion of a culture of quality in the institutions.*

No doubt the World Conference is right in this statement because, as a result of massive expansion, have been a number of new circumstances that must necessarily be addressed in the core protection and quality university education, such as: the inability of states to finance the expansion of enrollment, the emergence of the market; the sudden and sharp increase in

private Higher Education; the emergence of suppliers oriented almost only by a desire for profit; diversification of forms of access and financing; increasing market pressure that requires the positioning of higher education in highly competitive situations in many cases in a clear   detriment of its relevance; diversification of institutions and educational offerings; the "diploma mills", the extreme specialization of the institutions in specific areas of knowledge; the internationalization and cross-border Higher Education and, especially, the growing importance of accreditation as quality guarantee.

 In all these cases, evaluation and accreditation systems have a vital importance as social instruments for the quality of education offered and understood the World Conference in July 209 when he said in Paris:

> *Should be implemented throughout the higher education sector, regulatory mechanisms and quality assurance to promote excellence, equitable access and to create conditions for students to quality completion of the studies*

Reiterating after:

> *"... Both the public and private sector are obliged to provide a higher education quality and relevance, so that governments must strengthen the accreditation bodies and mechanisms to ensure transparency and public service status*

 All this because to ensure the progress of our peoples, we are not feasible to allow the University to take a course that is not their primary responsibility to move toward the challenges of society to reinvent an innovative and socially committed to anticipate and provide value social transformation in democracy, justice and freedom, on the understanding that this leads to a great challenge: to live in versus the established paradigm and help to put in difficulty to facilitate the delivery of new paradigms.

The new effort can not be understood as a call to fight the supply of quality private education, or the diversification of the institutions, nor the multiplicity of types of academic offerings or the internationalization and cross-border education provision. The objective is to promote evaluation and accreditation as social tools to promote and guarantee the quality of the Higher Education that we need in order to successfully face the challenges of the present as well as those of the future.

What we must fight, as also noted by the World Conference, the management is misleading, enlivened only by profit and the "easy" suicide

> *"Dishonest borrowers and poor quality Higher Education providers must be countered, as well as the serious problem of the spurious providers and the "diploma mills"... The fight against these "diploma mills" requires urgent multifaceted efforts both national and international*

Thus, faced with these new trends that are transforming the landscape of higher education and research, it is necessary to launch joint initiatives and concerted action at national, regional and international levels to ensure quality and sustainability of higher education systems. That is the challenge facing Latin America and the Caribbean and that is precisely the task for us to meet with the creation and strengthening of national accreditation agencies of higher education and its integration into international networks such as RIACES, for mutual cooperation and fruitful exchange of experiences, tools and specialists.

Besides the national objectives already mentioned, our effort must also be directed to build a *"Higher Education Latin American and Caribbean Space"*, based precisely on the fundamental principle of quality and above this base, on the elements of consideration and respect for diversity, mobility and attention to the challenge of competitiveness. The importance of the consolidation of this other effort is that it is conceived as an essential condition

in order to promote the mobility of professionals in the Region, their employability as well as the integral development of Latin America and the Caribbean Area

In this sense it is clear the **accreditation** rightful responsibility in the task of construction of the *"Higher Education Latin American and Caribbean Space"* since, with no doubt, the design and successful implementation of regional policies of both the **academic mobility** and **labor mobility** will not be viable if there is no advance with the solid and reliable mechanisms for quality assurance of higher education. .

The **mutual recognition** of results of the processes of assessment and accreditation made by the national accreditation agencies should be necessarily based on common or similar nature, guidelines, processes, criteria and methodologies

Even though we have been working hard in this issue, to date the processes of quality assurance in higher education in our region have been mostly carried out by national agencies without a solid and permanent regional coordination on the basis of a variety of interpretations of both the concept of quality as on the nature, powers and functions of the agencies responsible for their security.

This circumstance constitutes a weakness in the region to successfully in the highly competitive emerging knowledge society as the sole accreditation or quality assurance of an institution or a program, conducted by the responsible entity in a given country is very limited and limiting if not enjoy the credibility and international recognition, a fact which requires the construction of a regional system of mutual recognition of accreditation between agencies.

However, as pre consider it necessary to establish first consolidated quality assurance national agencies in all countries of the area, second to create a real quality assurance international community, and in a third place to establish a **regional strategy for evaluation and accreditation of the quality of higher**

education to ensure the quality level necessary to permit **comparability** of different systems and institutions of higher education in the Region, based on it, build a regionally organized system and acceptance of mutual recognition between national accreditation bodies

In these efforts is essential to consider that Latin America and the Caribbean include a wide diversity of political realities, social, educational and economic correspond to the specific characteristics of each of the countries that comprise them, and that this complexity national realities are added also, as mentioned above, the different points of view conceptual and procedural aspects of the quality agencies in the region.

For this reason, the criteria and guidelines for quality to be proposed as support for a *regional strategy for evaluation and accreditation of the quality of higher education* must be consistent with that diversity, opt for generic principles instead ofe specific requirements and focus on what should be done rather than the procedure for trouble figuring thereby respects diversity and safeguarding the autonomy of agencies.

So we have in our region to move with caution and depth but no less swiftly on a path that has only begun to achieve the ideal of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions already made the agencies of RIACES on the basis of security academic confidence, respect to diversity and national contexts, validation of the national accrediting agencies to other regional and extra "second tier" whose creation should be encouraged as a tool for confirming the transparency, efficiency and mutual trust and credibility, mutual bilateral recognition between national agencies, inter-governmental agreements of diploma recognition based in accreditation of quality. .

Traditionally, assurance and promotion of quality and accreditation have been seen as a function that takes place within higher education systems, mainly with the help of official accreditation agencies in each country limited to the accreditation of programs and careers within the national level.

Today, although the national accreditation is and must remain the basic unit of any process of accreditation and the nation-state must remain the main actor of this process, it is also true that systems of accreditation have to develop the capacity to operate internationally to carry out their duties.

There are several reasons that this:

1. First national accreditation agencies are confronting the need for accreditation themselves internationally through various international mechanisms for external evaluation by "second-tier agencies."

2. Second accreditation decisions taken by national official agencies are increasingly required to be valid and internationally accepted in this world that grows smaller every day, it is no secret that today's international markets and scientific networks graduates are inserted accredited programs operate increasingly on a transnational dimension.

3. Thirdly, as part of the process of globalization there are strong initiatives of creating "Regional and Inter-regional knowledge spaces" consistent with the "Global Knowledge Networks", these regional spaces are considered the basic units of the global science and the international academic community.

It is important, before continuing, to distinguish between, on one hand, the concept of *"international or regional accreditation"* as a process that is based on joint collaboration between official national accreditation agencies towards a mutual recognition and, on the other hand, the very different concept of accreditation by a foreign agency (agency of another country) which is sometimes confused with international accreditation. On this we must be clear, the alien is not international. In RIACES case what we promote is the international accreditation that responds to the reality that international or

transnational spaces are built from the spaces and the actions of national official **agencies.**

RIACES (the Ibero-American network for the Accreditation of Quality in Higher Education) aims "to promote cooperation and exchange among Ibero-American countries on issues related to the assessment and accreditation of higher education, thus contributing to quality assurance of higher education in the region." Established in 2003, the network is now composed of 30 full members and 5 associate members and gathers most of the countries belonging to its geographic and cultural area.

Its main objectives are:

- "To promote cooperation and exchange of information and experience among Ibero-American organizations and entities involved in the assessment and accreditation of higher education.

- To support the transfer of knowledge and information on QA in order to promote the development, in each country, of activities aiming to strengthen or qualify the assessment and accreditation of degrees and study programs, as well as the development of the bodies – QA agencies and others – carrying out these processes and of governmental entities involved in them.

- To play a significant role in the development of accreditation schemes which contribute to the recognition of degrees and programs of study, to the mobility of students, academic staff and professionals, and to the educational integration of the countries represented in RIACES.

- To promote quality assurance in higher education in Ibero-American countries through specific activities and with the support of national or international cooperation agencies.

- To support the formation of assessment and accreditation systems and agencies in the countries which have not set up such schemes and express their interest in doing so.

- To move forward the analysis of future developments of higher education in Ibero-America, with a special focus on quality assurance as an instrument for the continuing improvement of higher education institutions and their programs."

RIACES membership covers two categories:

- Full members, which can be:
    a. The national QA agencies officially recognized by the competent authorities in their countries.
    b. The governmental department of each country or the competent institution for the establishment of higher education policies related to QA.
    c. The sub-regional QA agencies officially recognized by the competent authorities.
- Associate members, such as international organizations focused on higher education and operating in Ibero-America.

During these years RIACES has been able to increase significantly its volume of activity and to implement its successive action plans with increasing efficiency. RIACES has already reached important outcomes:

- It has formed a broad Ibero-American QA community;
- It has gained regional and global legitimacy, in the area of QA as well as in the academic and political arenas;
- It has contributed to strengthen QA arrangements in the region, through many capacity-building activities;
- It has initiated progress towards regional integration, by promoting the harmonization of standards and procedures;
- It is steadily increasing its strategic approach.

As a final word about our work It must be said that accreditation, in all cases, is a highly participatory process, it's a critical internal and external evaluation and, most importantly, a joint construction of larger and higher quality conditions for Higher Education. Its greatest value lies in its findings of weaknesses and strengths and the joint commitment to improve quality as a permanent and continuous process.

The accreditation process includes a self-evaluation with the participation of professors, researchers, students, employers, administration and other stakeholders, an external evaluation by committees of peers and a final resolution of accreditation given by the Accreditation Agency

 All our efforts are aimed at continuous improvement of training of people with quality standards required for promotion of economic, social, political and cultural life of our peoples. Also, focuses on building a knowledge society and a regional scientific community, aimed at the establishment of an egalitarian and peaceful world, where prevails the responsibility of defending human rights, environment and partnership.

Working for quality of Higher Education is seeking for a "sine qua non" condition for successfully confront the great challenges of our time. To neglect that essential duty would be free with mediocrity and leave our children and young people defenseless against a world that will not forgive those persons or countries that deny quality of education as the best way for reaching human plenitude.

That is our task and that is the shared commitment of which we are all responsible

Suriname, April 2010

Suriname Caribbean Conference April 2010