

# Special Issue

## Cultural Changes at University Institutions: Agentification and Quality Management



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## INTRODUCTION

The nature of the changes and institutional arrangements that Spanish universities have undergone since the recovery of democracy are distinct and correspond to different periods. The 1980s in Spain saw a period of student social democratisation and, later, territorial expansion resulting from the promotion of autonomous communities' higher education policies. In the 1990s, the last socialist government of Felipe González approved the creation of private universities within an international environment marked by the growing commercialisation of higher education. But at the beginning of the 21st century, universities underwent structural changes because of the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). If we were to choose a concept to summarise, characterise, and explain the EHEA, it would be *agentification*. This phenomenon, according to Talbot et al. (2000), is based on the establishment of specialised public agencies, whose objective is to separate the role of the 'principal' and the 'agent', that is, to separate decision making from the capacity to manage, while also clearly specifying objectives and the means of achieving them. Thus, management units can become more efficient, transparent, and responsible for their actions (Serra, 2007). In the context of higher education, agencies would play the role of the principal and universities (both public and private), that of the agent.

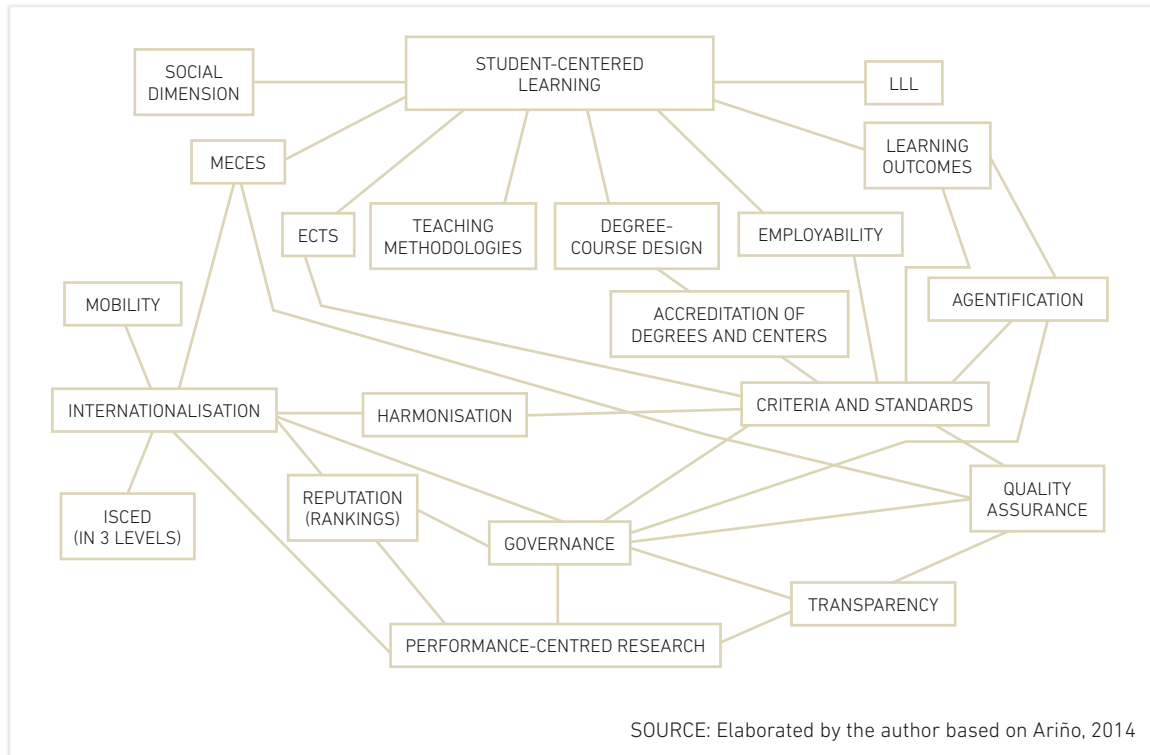
Since the implementation of the EHEA, universities have had more autonomy over their catalogue of qualification titles, their design and timing, how these fit in with their human resources, materials, and human capital and profiles, and their reputation for research, teaching, and knowledge transfer, all with the oversight of Spanish agencies and integrated into a network of other European and international agencies. Consequently, this institutional framework impacts the governance of universities and their teachers and administrative staff. Therefore, the role of teachers has significantly transformed in just a few years, provoking a certain generational split in the ethos of the youngest versus the oldest teachers (usually qualified civil servants—tenured adjunct lecturers and permanent senior professors) in terms of their methods and abilities—especially regarding teaching skills, methods, and online teaching. In addition, agencies have contributed to polarising the reputation of teaching activity in scientific research (Requena, 2014), which has become a source of symbolic capital creation that, in turn, generates resources (for research) and notoriety in the academic field.

In my view, the cultural change within universities that we are currently seeing, has a lot to do with this agencialised environment. Here, one of the articles in this monograph, written by the sociology professor Antonio Ariño, reminded me of the work of Ortega and Gasset and their clearly accurate and current opinions about the functions of universities. Ortega stated that one of the basic objectives of universities is their crucial role as agents dealing with the great issues, challenges to societies, and global agenda in our time. Even more so if the object of this reflection and analysis is its own role in the 21st century. This monographic issue of the *Debats* journal arose from this desire to modestly and transcendently, in limited Kantian terms, contribute to the dialogue on the cultural changes in the Spanish university system during this century, something that academics are, no doubt, concerned about.

The effect of the EHEA and its agencialising context are accelerating changes in the three institutional objectives: investigation, teaching, and transfer of knowledge, and has also changed their way of governing. Although it is impossible to provide a full account of the institutional pillars in a monograph such as this (which takes a theoretical and empirical approach), we aim to highlight and explain some key aspects of these changes. On the other hand, the agentification of the EHEA, has erased the historical traditions of curricular design, which have become more closed in southern European countries and more open or mixed in Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian countries. The effect of historical path dependence has been significantly weakened by the implementation of a system of qualification verification, monitoring, and accreditation (for the three levels of higher education: undergraduate, master's, and doctorate degrees) under the conditions of quality management.

We can define the EHEA synoptically according to the following conceptual map:

### Conceptual map of the European Higher Education Area



We are aware that analysis of the complex network of relationships between the concepts forming the EHEA semantics is a necessarily limited task. However, even so, this monograph describes the new student experience in the post-EHEA-authority period.

The article by Javier Paricio analyses the consequences of this student-client centrality. According to the author, students' evaluation of teaching quality in terms of satisfaction, via surveys or other mechanisms such as complaint or suggestion boxes, as required by quality agencies, improves their relationship with the university as a client. One of the issues related to the above, is the ability to distinguish different university student learning approaches (Biggs, 1995), because student satisfaction depends on their interest, which itself depends on each student's preference for a deep or more superficial learning approach. In the case of the latter—i.e. uncommitted students with little intrinsic motivation—their strategic objective is only to achieve a pass-level grade for the subject and so a teacher's demanding attitude may be poorly perceived, resulting in the paradoxical survey result of students

being dissatisfied with demanding teaching styles (Gargallo et al., 2006, Valle et al., 2000). Paricio also explains that this superficial approach adopted by some students is based on a social narrative which is very characteristic of our time, in which the immediate and direct usefulness of university degree knowledge prevails. He also presents arguments around the need to question quality management based on student satisfaction, among other things, because in many cases, due to their stage in life, students are unaware of the true need to learn certain content and its use in their professional future. It is common among university students that subjects and topics that did not seem useful or valuable at the time of their teaching, prove to be so with a few more years' experience.

In this environment, where students are polarised as customers receiving a service and therefore demand market value, the reputation of universities is another factor in the process of cultural change in university institutions, and this simultaneously reinforces the customer and service dimension in an increasingly global market. Thus, university rankings are becoming increasingly important in the social media and political debate. In their article, Martí Parellada and Montserrat Álvarez analyse the premises of the most recognised rankings, including the *Times Higher Education*, *Academic Ranking of World Universities*, and *Quacquarelli Symonds* systems, in which research is considered to be more important than other dimensions of university objectives. This leads some organisations to become excessively preoccupied with encouraging activities that directly affect the indicators of these rankings, which, in the long run, can be harmful to these universities. Accumulation of citations, especially in journals in the first quartile in the *Journal Citation Report* or in *Scopus*, are research quality indicators that are easily defined thanks to bibliometrics, and are objectives shared by the rankings, professors and researchers themselves, and the university quality evaluation agencies. Parellada and Álvarez review the methods used by these three rankings and present *U-Multirank*, which is being promoted by the European Commission as a more holistic option that tries to overcome the limitations of traditional rankings by taking five dimensions (teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer, international orientation, and contribution to regional development) into account in some disciplines and knowledge fields in which the humanities, arts and, to a lesser extent, the social sciences are given less weight.

Rankings have significantly contributed to the global university hierarchy and thus, to their national and international reputation. In addition, in this respect there are other indicators, related to internationalisation, that provide obvious indications about the state of the Spanish university system. Thus, this monograph also raises the issue of the lack of internationalisation among teaching staff which characterises Spanish universities. The article by Manuel Pereira-Puga empirically shows that, despite significant differences between autonomous communities, the proportion of international teaching

staff in the Spanish public university system is very low—less than 3% of the average Spanish workforce. It is evident that these low percentages have to do with the considerable ‘inbreeding’ among Spanish university teaching staff, which is undoubtedly a negative factor for the country’s research quality indicators; thus, there is ample room for future improvement in this area, if other problems such as the autonomy and governance of public universities are resolved. We know that a high level of international researchers in research institutions is a key factor in making research, development, and innovation (R&D+I) systems as efficient as possible. In this sense, the case of Holland is a clear example.

This monograph also incorporates the vision of all of these processes of cultural change in universities from the perspective of three researchers who analyse and contextualise the case example of Portugal. According to the article by Cristina Sin, Orlanda Tavares, and Alberto Amaral, a formative assessment approach was not taken when implementing quality management in Portugal (Monnier, 1995), and consequently, agencification is negatively recognised among Portuguese teaching staff because they are not yet able to recognise the positive effects it could have on their universities. Thus, Portugal bears similarities with the Spanish case, although the Portuguese quality agency was implemented several years after the creation of ANECA. For example, the accreditation process has allowed universities to eliminate qualifications from their catalogue that, a priori, do not meet the accreditation requirements for these degrees. In the first two years of the agency, in 2010-2011, 25% of the degree-program titles disappeared from those on offer at Portuguese universities. This ‘sieving’ effect may also be similar in Spain, although in this respect, we do not yet have the relevant data for undergraduate and master’s degrees; however, the case of doctoral studies in Spain may be very illustrative of the ‘cleaning’ effect that the agency had in Portugal: in Spain, Royal Decree 99/2011 meant that all doctoral programs had to pass a verification process; at the time of its publication, there were more than 4000 programs, while at present there are slightly more than 1000 verified titles.

Another of the most significant aspects of the article by Sin, Tavares, and Amaral is their analysis of the Portuguese situation through ideal types (a reactive–responsive quality culture). Thus, they distinguish universities which adopted a culture of quality in a deep and meaningful way from those who conceived it superficially, only in terms of the quality agency’s formal requirements. In this respect, there is not enough scientific literature relating to Spain to be able to analyse the extent to which the quality systems developed inside this audit environment fulfil the function within a culture of responsive quality. It is key that daily university organisation practices are a faithful reflection of the internal quality assurance system and are not merely a formal fulfilment of the quality agency’s requirements.

In the Spanish case, this interesting question will be one of the next lines of research for those interested in this monograph. Likewise, in the Portuguese case, accreditation has led to significant improvements with respect to the quality of teaching staff, although, as the authors state, the pedagogical training of teachers should be supported, as far as possible, under the guidance of the appropriate Portuguese ministry—as in the Spanish case.

The processes of accreditation, from the point of view of evaluation practice, are also analysed in this monograph by taking an auto-ethnographic approach. This institutional evaluation practice started to be developed in 2014 in Spain. Thus, the article by Rubio Arostegui uses this methodological approach to analyse the implementation of evaluation practices for the quality agency of the Community of Madrid, through his personal experience as a panellist, focussing on learning results and the value of the research produced by the human resources assigned to the degree-program title: two criteria that the quality agencies consider to be critical for the final report for a degree-program title to be favourable. Renewal of accreditation is similar to a process of peer review, although it involves different processes and dynamics compared to the traditional academic review of research projects or scientific journals. Its objective is to make the evaluation processes explicit, so as to produce evidence for aspects that can be improved upon in the renewal panels' evaluation, when accrediting university degrees from the viewpoint of academic rigor.

Finally, this monograph includes an article looking at the cultural function of Spanish universities. Antonio Ariño brings his theoretical reflections to the discussion, but these are also based on his long experience in cultural management at the University of Valencia. His article suggests that universities' ideas, functions, and objectives regarding culture should complement their teaching, research, and knowledge transfer activities. The culture that universities must promote and disseminate must be critical and creative: open to debate and positioned with respect to the great challenges of society as a whole. In turn, universities should propose alternatives and evidence based on their scientific activity, and assume the risk and benefits of their creativity. But above all, as highlighted in his article, and referring back to Ortega and Gasset, their work must be current. There can be no worse thing for universities as institutions, than for them to not be at the service of society, agents of cultural change, or aware of the challenges of today. It is clear that national, regional, and European public R&D+I calls all request the same thing, solutions to challenges. But it is not enough for research-derived knowledge that contributes to current challenges to remain in the academic environment of projects, journals, and conferences: it must play a prominent role in the rest of society and its immediate environment, thus linking it to one of the most recurrent concepts of today, that of sustainability.

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