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The Growing Accountability Agenda: Progress or Mixed Blessing?

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ORGANISATION DE COOPÉRATION ET
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THE GROWING ACCOUNTABILITY AGENDA: PROGRESS OR MIXED BLESSING?

Jamil Salmi, World Bank

In the past decade, accountability has become a major concern in most parts of the world. Governments, parliaments and society at large are increasingly asking universities to justify the use of public resources and account more thoroughly for their teaching and research results. Is this a favorable development for tertiary education? Or is there too much accountability, at the risk of stifling initiative among university leaders?

This article analyzes the main dimensions of the growing accountability agenda, examines some of the negative and positive consequences of this evolution, and proposes a few guiding principles for achieving a balanced approach to accountability in tertiary education. It observes that the universal push for increased accountability has made the role of university leaders much more demanding, transforming the competencies expected of them and the ensuing capacity building needs of university management teams. It concludes by observing that accountability is meaningful only to the extent that tertiary education institutions are actually empowered to operate in an autonomous and responsible way.

Introduction

Personally, I like the university. They gave us money and facilities, and we didn't have to produce anything. You've never been out of college. You don't know what it's like out there. . I've worked in the private sector. They expect results.

Dan Akroyd talking to Bill Murray after both of them lost their jobs as university researchers, in the movie Ghostbusters (Penn, 2007).

Compared to the well-established tradition of accreditation in the US, public universities in most countries in other parts of the world have typically operated in a very autonomous manner. In many cases, the leaders of these universities are subject to little if any outside control. In the francophone countries of Africa, for example, public universities enjoy full independence in the selection (election) of their leaders and complete management autonomy regarding their daily operation. They are known for being very wasteful, with repetition rates in the 25 to 50 percent range, but they do not have to answer for their inefficient performance. In several Latin-American countries, Nicaragua, Honduras, Bolivia, Ecuador for example, the Constitution entitles the public universities to a fixed percentage of the annual budget which they are free to use without any accountability. In Mexico, some public universities refused, in the name of autonomy, to submit financial audits to the government until the Supreme Court rendered a judgment in September 2002 ordering them to start complying with this requirement. In Colombia, the universities were successful in the early 2000s in getting the Constitutional Court to blocking the Ministry of Education from shifting to a performance-based budget allocation system. Some countries, like Peru, do not even have a government ministry or agency officially responsible for steering or supervising the tertiary education sector.

In the past decade, however, accountability has become a major concern in most parts of the world. Governments, parliaments and society at large are increasingly asking universities to justify the use of public resources and account more thoroughly for their teaching and research results (Fielden, 2007). In Europe, an important part of the ongoing Bologna process consists in designing a qualifications framework that will provide common performance

criteria in the form of learning outcomes and competencies for each degree awarded. In the US, one of the key recommendations made by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education set up by Secretary of Education Spellings in 2005 was to call for measures of student learning to assess the actual added value achieved by tertiary education institutions.

Accountability may take many forms: legal requirements such as licensing, financial audits and reports, quality assurance procedures such as program or institutional accreditation, benchmarking exercises to compare programs across institutions, professional qualification examinations, budget allocation mechanisms that reward performance, and oversight structures such as governing boards with representation from external stakeholders. The press itself, with its controversial league tables, has entered the accountability arena in great force.

Is this a favorable development for tertiary education? Or is there too much accountability, at the risk of stifling initiative and confidence among university leaders? This article analyzes the main dimensions of the growing accountability agenda, examines some of the negative and positive consequences of this evolution, and considers a few guiding principles for achieving a balanced approach to accountability and autonomy in tertiary education.

The Growing Accountability Agenda

No good book was ever written on command, nor can good teaching occur under duress. And yet, conceding this, the fact remains that left entirely to their own devices academic communities are no less prone than other professional organizations to slip unconsciously into complacent habits, inward-looking standards of quality, self-serving canons of behavior. To counter these tendencies, there will always be a need to engage the outside world in a lively, continuing debate over the university's social responsibilities (Bok, 1990).

For universities and their leaders, accountability represents the ethical and managerial obligation to report on their activities and results, explain their performance, and assume the responsibility for unmet expectations. At the very minimum, all tertiary education institutions can be legally required to fulfill the following two basic dimensions of accountability: integrity in the delivery of education services and honesty in the use of financial resources. In addition, many stakeholders have a legitimate claim to expect a cost-effective use of available resources, the best possible quality and relevance for the programs and courses offered by these institutions.

In the first instance, one of the most basic responsibilities of the State is to establish and enforce a regulatory framework to prevent unethical, fraudulent and corrupt practices in tertiary education as in other important areas of social life. In recent years, accusations of flawed medical research results in the UK, reports of Australian universities cutting corners to attract foreign students, and the student loan scandal in the US have shown the need for greater vigilance, even in countries with strong accountability mechanisms. Malpractices such as academic fraud, accreditation scams and misuse of resources plague the tertiary education systems of many developing and transition countries where corruption is endemic (Hallak and Poisson, 2006). Table 1 presents the various categories of fraudulent and unethical practices in tertiary education.

Table 1: Catalogue of Unethical Practices in Tertiary Education

Type of Corruption / Fraudulent Practice	Definition / description	Perpetuators	Victims
<u>Financial Management</u>			
Embezzlement	Stealing or misusing funds (including research grants); falsification of accounting records	Institution	State
Fraud in Public Tender	Offering bribes (monetary or non-monetary) to obtain contracts	Institution	State
Supplier Collusion	Illegal agreement, among institutions, on tuition fees and financial aid packages to avoid competition.	Institutions	Students
<u>Academic Management</u>			
Examination Fraud	Students cheating when taking exams or writing papers (copying, plagiarism)	Students	Institution
Unethical behavior of faculty	Sale of exam questions or grades, obligation to buy private lessons or textbooks, nepotism, discrimination, sexual harassment	Faculty	Students, Employers, Society
Research Fraud	Research data and/or results are misreported and/or misused.	Faculty	Institution, State, Society
Unethical management of faculty career	Corruption in hiring and promotion; discrimination based on gender, political or ethnical grounds	Institution	Faculty, Society
Fraud in Quality Assurance Process	Bribes paid to accreditation bodies / external reviewers to gain / maintain accreditation; biased external reviewers; fake accreditation body	Institution, Accreditation Agencies	Students, Institutions not involved in fraud, Society
<u>Information Management</u>			
Provision of False Credentials	Students applying with fake or falsified records	Students	Institution
Data Manipulation	Supplying false or doctored data to government agency, accreditation association or ranking body	Institution	State, students, employers, society
Biased Information	University officials have special relationships with certain agencies offering services to students (US colleges favoring student loan providers).	Institution, Service provider	Students

Adapted by Sonali Ballal and Jamil Salmi from Hallak and Poisson (2006)

In the second instance, universities should legitimately be held accountable for their use of public resources and the quality of their outputs. Mechanisms are therefore needed to measure and monitor the efficiency in resource utilization, and assess the quality and relevance of the training received by university graduates, the productivity of research activities, and the contribution of universities to the local economy, especially in terms of technology transfer. Some governments and institutional leaders are also paying close attention to the equity balance in student recruitment and success.

The evolution towards increased accountability that can be observed in many parts of the world is not only a matter of more governments expecting their universities to answer for their performance and putting in place new mechanisms to achieve this. The growing accountability agenda is also reflected in the multiplicity of stakeholders, the multiplicity of themes under scrutiny, and the multiplicity of instruments and channels of accountability. Together, these three dimensions make for a situation of unprecedented complexity.

Today university leaders must satisfy at the same time the competing demands of several groups of stakeholders that can be divided into five generic categories: (i) society at large, (ii) government which, depending on the context, can be national, provincial or municipal, (iii) employers, (iv) teachers, and (v) the students themselves. Even within government structures, demands for accountability in tertiary education are coming from new actors. In Denmark, for example, responsibility for the universities sector has been entrusted to the Ministry of Technology. In Malaysia, the Prime Minister's Economic Planning Unit has taken a leadership role in thinking about the contribution of tertiary education to the national competitiveness agenda.

In many developing countries, one of the most fundamental shifts taking place is making universities less faculty-oriented and more attuned to the needs of the student community. In some cases, the *raison d'être* of public universities had become to provide staff employment and benefits rather than to serve as educational establishments focused primarily on preparing students as citizens and professionals. Such systems were rigorously guarded by academic councils that were accountable almost exclusively to administrative staff and faculty (World Bank, 2002). But from the student perspective, accountability means that the leadership of the university supports the establishment of an institutional culture where their rights are respected, good teaching and ethical behavior of faculty is encouraged, and the relevance of programs is assured.

To respond to the demands of their external and internal stakeholders, university leaders must take many concerns into consideration, including: the extent to which access is offered evenly to all groups in society (equity), the standards of teaching and research (quality), the degree to which graduates receive an education matching labor market needs (relevance), the contribution of the university to local and/or national economic development (third mission), the values imparted by tertiary education institutions (citizenship and nation-building), the manner in which public resources are utilized (internal efficiency) and the financial capacity of the tertiary education system to grow and maintain high standards at the same time (sustainability).

In several countries, tertiary education institutions are even being held accountable for their impact on the environment. A recent survey of the top 100 universities and colleges in the US has measured the institutions' sustainability programs with respect to food, recycling, green buildings, climate change, and energy conservation (June, 2007). In September 2007, when Harvard and Yale announced the construction of a new sciences campus and a new business school building, respectively, the main emphasis in their public statement was not about the educational purpose of these investments but about their pledge to limit carbon emissions (Appelbaum, 2007). Students at the University of St-Gallen in Switzerland prepared a ranking of business schools reflecting the degree to which they emphasize corporate social responsibility in their approach to business development and management. Similarly, the biannual ranking prepared by the Aspen Institute seeks to identify innovative MBA programs that "lead the way in integrating issues of social and environmental stewardship into business school curricula and research" (Aspen Institute, 2005).

In their attempts to accommodate these multiple agendas, institutional leaders often face difficulties in convincing their constituencies, especially the faculty. The teaching staff has traditionally been the most powerful group in universities, especially where the head of the institution and faculty deans are democratically elected. Professors and researchers usually have a powerful, sometimes decisive voice on the various academic councils that govern universities.

Not even the most prestigious institutions are immune from these tensions, as Oxford University's failed attempt at financial reform illustrates. In the increasingly competitive market for academics, Oxford's central authorities face the need for additional resources to continue hiring internationally renowned professors and researchers. They have been constrained, however, by centuries-old governance arrangements and authority structures that give the control of a large share of the university's wealth to its individual colleges. One aspect of the reform proposals submitted in 2006 by Vice Chancellor John Hood was to give more power over these resources to the University's central leadership, while also allowing for increased financial oversight by outsiders. The reform was ultimately rejected by Oxford's academic community, leading to Hood's decision to step down at the end of his five-year term in 2009. Similarly, the demise of Harvard University President Summers in 2006 was largely due to the opposition of some of the faculty to his attempts to increase the scrutiny over the quality and rigor of the university's programs.

Finally, the pressure for compliance comes through an increasingly wide range of accountability mechanisms. The most common ones are the legal requirements that governments rely on to make tertiary education institutions accountable. Usually inscribed in the higher education law, ministerial decrees and public sector regulations, they encompass aspects of financial management (budget documents, mandatory financial audits, publicly available audit reports), quality assurance (licensing, accreditation, academic audits), and general planning and reporting requirements such as the preparation and monitoring of key performance indicators as practiced in the UK, Australia and several US states.

Accountability can be enforced in an indirect way, for example through financial incentives such as performance-based budget allocation mechanisms and competitive funds available only to those institutions whose projects satisfy official policy objectives. The performance contracts in France, Austria, Spain and Chile allow universities to receive additional funding against their commitment to fulfill a number of national objectives measured with specific targets agreed between the ministry of education and the institutions. In many countries, tertiary education institutions are encouraged to elaborate strategic plans outlining their vision of the future and the specific actions that they intend to implement to reach their strategic objectives.

Demand-side financing mechanisms can also be used to promote greater accountability. In the sixty plus countries that have a student loan system, financial aid is often available only for studies in *bona fidae* institutions, that is universities and colleges that are licensed (at the minimum) or even accredited. Innovative funding approaches, such as the voucher systems recently established in the US State of Colorado and in several former Soviet Union republics (Kazakhstan, Armenia) or the contracting of places in private universities piloted in Brazil and the Department of Antioquia in Colombia, give students more power to enroll in the institution of their choice (Salmi and Hauptman, 2006).

Another way of bringing accountability to the wider community is to establish University Boards with a majority of outside members who have the power to hire (and fire) the leader of

the institution, as has recently happened in Denmark and Norway (Fielden, 2008). A recent survey of governance reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa found several instances of countries moving towards greater external representation on university boards, including Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, Uganda and Zambia (Lao and Saint, 2008).

The interplay of all these factors and dimensions makes for a dynamic relationship between universities and their stakeholders, with the pressure for accountability coming sometimes from unexpected quarters, as illustrated by the Colombian accreditation experience and the negative accreditation list announced by Intel, the semiconductor maker. Colombia was the first country in Latin America to set up a national accreditation system in the mid 1990s, but the number of programs reviewed by the new accreditation agency remained relatively low in the first years because accreditation was voluntary and the most prestigious universities, public and private, did not feel any compulsion to participate. But after the country's main newspaper, *El Tiempo*, started to publish the full list of accredited programs, many more universities joined the accreditation process for fear of being shunned by the students. In the same vein, Intel announced in August 2007 that it was taking more than 100 US universities and colleges out of the list of eligible institutions where its employees could study for retraining purposes at the firm's expense because of quality concerns.

The power of public opinion is nowhere more visible than in the growing influence of rankings. Initially limited to the US, university rankings and league tables have proliferated in recent years, appearing in more than 35 industrial and developing countries (Salmi and Saroyan, 2007). Even recognizing the methodological limitations of these rankings, in many cases the mass media have played a useful educational role by making relevant information available to the public, especially in countries lacking a formal system of quality assurance. In Poland, for example, when the transition to the market economy started in the early 1990s and many private education institutions began to operate, there was a thirst for information about the quality of these institutions, which pushed the owner of the *Perspektywy* magazine to initiate the country's first ranking. Similarly, in Japan, for many years the annual ranking published by the *Ashi Shimbun* newspaper fulfilled an essential quality assurance function in the absence of any evaluation or accreditation agency.

To summarize the above discussion, Table 2 attempts to map out the contribution of each instrument to the five main dimensions of accountability.

Table 2: Instruments of Accountability

Dimensions Instruments	Academic integrity	Fiscal integrity	Effective use of resources	Quality and relevance	Equity
Strategic plan				X	X
Key performance indicators			X	X	X
Budget			X		
Financial audit		X	X		
Public reporting			X	X	X
Licensing	X				
Accreditation / academic audit / evaluation	X			X	
Performance contracts			X	X	X
Scholarships / student loans / vouchers			X	X	

Rankings / benchmarking				X	
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The Accountability Crisis

*Not everything that counts can be measured,
not everything that can be counted is meaningful.
Einstein*

It is often said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. In recent years, grievances about excessive accountability requirements and their negative consequences have come from many quarters. In the UK and Australia, for example, universities have complained of performance indicators overload, stressing that too much energy and time is spent on mining and reporting the data monitored by the government. In the US, tertiary education institutions have expressed concern about the voluminous accountability information that they must produce, including reporting to regional and specialized accreditation associations, the Federal Department of Education, state legislatures and state higher education commissions.

The reporting burden is not getting heavier only for university administrators. It also affects faculty. Researchers spend more time competing for resources and justifying their utilization. A number of countries, Mexico for instance, have introduced comprehensive evaluation systems to assess and reward teacher performance.

Another common complaint is about the tyranny of the rankings published by the press, despite their questionable use of unreliable data and their significant methodological flaws. After *Asiaweek* published its first rankings of Asian and Pacific region universities in 1997 and 1998, 35 universities refused to participate in the survey in 1999; more than half from Japan and China. The boycott led to the actual termination of the initiative. In Malaysia, after the 2005 league table published by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* showed the country's top two universities slipping by almost 100 places compared to the previous year, the leader of the opposition called for a Royal Commission of Inquiry, notwithstanding the fact that the dramatic decline was partly due to a change in the ranking methodology. The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya, the country's flagship university, was forced to resign a few weeks later. More recently, in 2007, two major boycotts were initiated by leading universities in Canada and the US against the Macleans and US News and World Report rankings, respectively. In France, after the publication of the 2008 Shanghai rankings, the Secretary General of the national teacher union (SNESUP) complained that it was unfair to compare the performance of universities to a race at the Olympic Games. He proposed that each university community should declare its own evaluation criteria (Rotman, 2008).

The recent controversy around the recommendations of the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education in the US, regarding the need to measure learning outcomes, illustrates the weariness of the tertiary education community vis-à-vis additional accountability demands beyond accreditation. One of the main claims of the Commission was that accreditation falls short of providing a clear picture of actual learning outcomes. In the own words of Secretary of Education Spellings, "by law, student learning is a core part of accreditation. Unfortunately, students are often the least informed, and the last considered. Accreditation remains of the least publicized, lest transparent parts of higher education—even compared to the Byzantine and bewildering financial aid system" (NACIQI, 2007). Since the publication of the Commission report, many stakeholders in the higher education community,

especially the accreditation associations, have lobbied hard to avoid the imposition of standardized measures of student learning outcomes either by the Federal government or by Congress.

This debate has even taken an international dimension after the OECD announced its plan to undertake a study to explore the feasibility of measuring student learning outcomes across tertiary education institutions in various countries, as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) does for secondary education students. Even though AHELO, the International Assessment of Higher Education Outcomes, is meant to focus on generic skills such as analytical reasoning and critical thinking, it has been met with skepticism by the European and US higher education community, as the following quotes reveal (Labi, 2007):

“We are now asking the institutions to identify their learning outcomes, and we know from the American experience that these frameworks take a long time to develop in a sound way... It is a problem, there is no question about it.” Andrée Sursock, deputy secretary general of the European University Association

“The notion of measuring students' achievement within the United States has been very controversial. The notion of developing a mechanism to do it across the world seems orders of magnitude more controversial.” Terry W. Hartle, senior vice president for government and public affairs at the American Council on Education

“I don't know the details. But just as I don't think the U.S. government should be the promulgator of academic standards for the U.S. community, I'm very uneasy about an organization comprised of governments driving something like this.” Peter McPherson, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges

In developing and transition countries, university leaders often complain that government confuses accountability with excessive control. Generally speaking, it is neither realistic nor fair to expect tertiary education institutions that enjoy limited autonomy to be fully accountable for their performance. In some developing countries, public universities receive insufficient, often unpredictable budgets, and are not allowed to generate or keep additional resources. They do not have the authority to determine staffing policy, budgetary allocations, and the number of students admitted. They have little say about the number of faculty positions, the level of salaries, or promotions. Brazil's Law of *Isonomy* establishes uniform salaries for all federal jobs, including those in the federal universities. A recent study of Madagascar found that:

In the absence of performance-based budget allocation processes and clear accountability mechanisms, public universities have no managerial and financial incentives to use the limited available resources effectively. Internal efficiency is very low, most teaching is done through complementary hours paid on top of faculty salaries, and the universities have a disproportionate number of administrative staff (Salmi, 2008).

In most Francophone systems, open access policies prevent university leaders from controlling the number of students they admit. This often translates into student enrollments that greatly exceed the existing infrastructure and available resources (World Bank, 2002).

Even in countries intent on relying more on market forces than on government control to steer their tertiary education system, governments find it difficult to decrease the degree of control over public universities. In Chile, for instance, where public universities receive less than 30% of their budget from the State, they are still subjected to civil service regulations,

especially with regard to human resources policies, financial management and the procurement of goods and services. As a result, they do not enjoy the needed flexibility to use available resources in the most efficient manner and to compete with private institutions on a level playing field. This situation carries an element of paradox in the case of Chile, where private sector enrolment accounts for more than two-thirds of the total student population and the government actively encourages competition among public and private institutions through various funding instruments (voucher system, competitive research funds, guaranteed student loan system, etc.). The paradox is that, although public universities receive the majority share of their funding from private sources, they must follow civil service regulations while the oldest private universities, which receive a significant part of their income from public sources, are not constrained by the same regulations, even in terms of financial control for the public portion of their resources (OECD and World Bank, 2008).

**Box 1 – Market Forces vs. Central Control
in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan**

Comparing recent trends in two former Soviet Union republics, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, helps to illustrate the existence of practices that may stifle the development of the tertiary education sector. Kazakhstan introduced in 2001 a voucher-like allocation system to distribute public resources for tertiary education. About 20 percent of the students receive education grants to study in the public or private institution of their choice. To be eligible, institutions must have received a positive evaluation from the quality assurance unit of the Ministry of Education. As a result, all tertiary education institutions have become more attentive to the quality and relevance of their programs—or at least their reputation—as it determines their ability to attract education grant beneficiaries.

In Azerbaijan, by contrast, the Ministry of Education centrally controls student intake in every university in the country, even in private ones. The Ministry also decides which program a university is allowed to open, and even enforces the closing of programs in areas perceived to be of little relevance or saturated. For example, in 2006, a number of universities had to terminate their programs in law, medicine or international relations. This restrictive planning framework makes it difficult for the more dynamic tertiary education institutions to innovate and expand.

Source: Field trips by the author in 2006 (Kazakhstan) and 2007 (Azerbaijan)

In developing countries where graduate unemployment is high, such as Morocco, Egypt or India, the blame often goes to the universities which are accused of offering programs that are of poor quality and little relevance to labor market needs. But the reality is that, in these countries, there is a fundamental arithmetic imbalance between the rapidly increasing numbers of graduates, as a result of demographic growth and expansion of basic education, against a background of limited job creation in the modern sector. Even when tertiary education institutions produce well-trained graduates, the sheer imbalance in numbers makes graduate unemployment unavoidable.

These real or perceived excesses can have worrisome unintended consequences. In the US and Canada, for instance, there have been rumors of universities and colleges “doctoring” their statistics to improve their standing in the rankings. Even in the absence of unethical behaviors, institutions may succumb to the natural temptation of paying more attention to

factors such as SAT scores and donations from alumni that receive prominence in the rankings, at the detriment of other aspects, such as the quality of teaching and learning that may be more important from an education viewpoint.

Another trend of concern in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, has been the enforcement, in a growing number of US universities and colleges, of politically correct codes of conduct such as the Academic Bill of Rights, heavily influenced by the far-right republican agenda, resulting in non negligible restrictions of academic freedom. The September 2007 decision of the President of the University of California in Irvine to withdraw the nomination of the constitutional scholar Chemerinsky as Dean of the Law School was the latest manifestation of the heavy-handed influence of the republican agenda. A number of top universities have opted to reject lucrative research contracts from the US Department of Defense rather than compromising academic freedom. A 2007 survey of 20 top schools found 180 instances of worrisome clauses attached by the federal government to research contracts, including twelve at the University of California in Berkeley (UWN, 2008).

Expected and Unintended Benefits of Accountability

It is not just about catching the thieves, it is about having the right institutional and structural procedures to ensure that you prevent the occurrence of bad behavior.
Obiageli Ezekwesili, former head of anti-corruption drive, Nigeria

In spite of the problems that are associated with excessive accountability requirements, employers, students and tertiary education institutions all benefit from increased information about existing programs and labor market outcomes. In countries where surveys of student engagement are conducted regularly (Australia, Canada, UK, US), high school graduates are better equipped to choose which college or university they would like to attend.

Labor market observatories, which provide detailed information about the job characteristics of graduates from various institutions and programs, are another source of relevant information. In Tunisia, for example, a recent tracer study showed that graduates from engineering schools, technology institutes and the more selective faculties had much better employment opportunities than graduates from open access faculties in (humanities, law and economics). In Chile, the survey of employers undertaken by the *Que Pasa* weekly magazine is an important source for the preparation of its annual ranking of university programs.

Another interesting example comes from Brazil where in 1996 the Ministry of Education introduced an assessment test meant to compare the quality of undergraduate programs across public and private universities. Even though the results of the *Provão* did not count towards the marks of graduating students, at first it met with a lot of opposition and resistance. The students were initially reluctant to take the test, and the universities themselves were not keen to encourage their students to participate, especially after the first rounds showed that some of the top public universities had scored less than expected while some students from lesser known private universities had achieved good results. But, over time, the *Provão* became more accepted and, increasingly, employers asked job applicants to share their test results, thus making it a very strong incentive for students to participate. The *Provão* results even influenced students in their choice of tertiary institution. Between 1996 and 2002, the demand for courses in private institutions that had been evaluated positively grew by about 20%, whereas the demand for courses with a negative assessment went down by 41 percent (Salmi and Saroyan, 2007).

Conscious of the need for more transparency, many US university leaders have contemplated initiatives to make their institutions more accountable on a voluntary basis. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) announced in September 2007 that they would start publishing key performance indicators in the context of a Voluntary System of Accountability Program. According to the plan released by the two associations, each participating university would use a common template—called College Portrait—to post key data on cost, transfer and graduation rates, and student satisfaction. The Program will also include an assessment of student learning from one of the following three existing tests: Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, Collegiate Learning Assessment, and Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (Fischer, 2007). Among the sponsors of this proposal, aimed as a reaction to the recommendations—and perceived threats—contained in the Spellings Commission report, are the same university presidents who decided to boycott the US News and World Report rankings.

Similarly a report released in January 2007 by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges suggests that governing boards should improve their own accountability standards and develop codes of conduct to avoid increased government interference (Fain, 2007). Recognizing the need to uphold the mission, heritage and values of their institutions and to be accountable to the public interest and the public trust, the Association proposes greater attention and stricter rules with respect to fiscal integrity, board performance, educational quality, and presidential search, assessment and compensation.

A similar trend can be observed in other parts of the world. Australian universities have taken the initiative to build a set of indicators that would measure the scope and impact of their regional engagement. In Belgium, where there is no official accreditation system, the Flemish universities have voluntarily joined the German ranking exercise for benchmarking purposes. In France, ironically, when the government proposed in July 2007 that universities could enjoy increased autonomy against more accountability on a voluntary basis, there was a unanimous outcry. The scope of proposed autonomy was then reduced but imposed to all universities.

Box 2 – Balancing Autonomy and Accountability in Ireland

The Irish case represents perhaps one of the most interesting experiences of partnership between government and the university sector in setting up a comprehensive accountability framework. Recognizing that good governance is essential given the crucial role played by tertiary education in the country's economic and social development, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) decided in 2001 to adopt a Code of Governance that goes beyond the accountability requirements set by the 1997 Universities Act.

This code was revised in 2007 in consultation with the Higher Education Authority to reflect recent developments in governance arrangements in Ireland and Europe and take into consideration the recommendations of the 2004 Review of Higher Education in Ireland by the OECD. The new version extends the recommendations on principles of good governance and good practices beyond the realm of financial management that was the primary focus of the 2001 Code. This includes, in particular, a written code of conduct for members of the governing board and university employees, principles of quality customer service, a system of internal controls and risk management, reliance on strategic planning to set objectives and targets

against which performance can be measured, and detailed reporting arrangements.

Source: HEA and IUA (2007). Governance of Irish Universities: A Governance Code of Legislation, Principles, Best Practice and Guidelines.

Accountability can also be useful when tertiary education institutions use their reporting obligations as a management tool to monitor ability to meet strategic targets. In the Province of Quebec, the annual presentation that university rectors are required by law to make to Parliament provides an opportunity to showcase their plans and achievements.

In sum, the new instruments of accountability are helping to promote a culture of transparency about the outcomes of tertiary education institutions. In the Netherlands, for example, accreditation reports are made available to the public. The results of international league tables, especially the ranking of research universities prepared by Shanghai Jiao Tong University since 2003, are increasingly watched by countries and institutions eager to benchmark themselves in an international perspective. The French Minister of Higher Education declared a few days after the publication of the 2008 rankings that “these lists of winners may not be ideal, but they do exist... They show the urgency of reform for the [French] university” (Benoît, 2008).

But not all stakeholders are ready for this kind of transparency. US accreditation associations maintain a shroud of secrecy over accreditation reports. In Pakistan, the vice-chancellors pressured the Higher Education Commission not to make the results of its first ranking available to the public (Salmi and Saroyan, 2007). In New Zealand, two universities successfully sued the government in March 2004 to prevent the publication of an international ranking that found them poorly placed in comparison with their British and Australian competitors. Another example of reluctant use of available information comes from the Colombian Ministry of Education, which has developed a sophisticated Labor Market Observatory collecting detailed data on the labor market outcomes of graduates by university and program. But the government has agreed not to publish these data under pressure from the universities which are afraid that the results of individual universities and programs would be seen by the public.

Conclusion: the Way Forward

The organizing principle for accountability must be pride, not fear.
NCAHE, 2005

The proliferation of accountability obligations and mechanisms has not been met with enthusiasm by all stakeholders in the tertiary education community. But notwithstanding the excesses and misunderstandings that accountability requirements sometimes bring about, the growing availability of information about tertiary education institutions and their results can only be saluted as a healthy development. The multiplicity of accountability mechanisms provides students, employers, government and society at large with transparent data about the operation and outcomes of tertiary education institutions. These institutions, in turn, have better instruments to assess their strengths and weaknesses, and reflect on how to improve their performance.

The universal push for increased accountability has made the role of university leaders much more demanding. They are under constant pressure to report on their plans and justify

their achievements, exposing themselves to harsh sanctions if they fail to meet expectations, as the recent spate of dismissals of university presidents in the US illustrates.

In light of the analysis undertaken in this article, two principles of good accountability can be proposed. First, accountability works better when it is experienced in a constructive way than when it is imposed in an inquisition-like mode. Tertiary education institutions are more likely to appreciate the value of their reporting obligations if the relationship with their stakeholders, especially government authorities, responds to positive incentives rather than punitive measures. Therefore, accountability should be less about justifying a poor performance and more about making strategic choices to improve results. Institutions should not as much react to the past as try to shape their future.

Second, the most effective accountability mechanisms are those that are mutually agreed or are voluntarily embraced by tertiary education institutions. This ensures a greater sense of responsibility with respect to the feedback process and fuller ownership of the agreed instruments. The performance contracts mentioned earlier are a good example of this kind of shared commitment.

In both cases, institutional leaders need to focus first on defining a clear purpose and measurable objectives, and then on motivating all stakeholders to assume joint responsibility for achieving these goals. This may involve a balancing act reflecting the need to reconcile multiple objectives that are not always compatible. For example, the pursuit of equity may be defeated by highly competitive admission conditions, especially in countries with socially segregated secondary schools (like Brazil) and / or a strong correlation between academic preparation and socio-economic origin (like France).

This irreversible evolution towards increased accountability has transformed the competencies expected of university leaders and the ensuing capacity building needs of university management teams. University presidents / rectors / vice-chancellors are accountable for many roles—leader of the academic community, chief executive of the business enterprise, spokesperson, fundraiser, advocate for all of higher education—for which they are not necessarily well prepared (June, 2006). They need to be able to harness the accountability agenda as a vehicle to focus on results and work towards improved performance.

Various national and international training programs are available to help strengthen these dimensions which have become increasingly critical for effective governance purposes. They include training in leadership techniques, strategic and financial planning, budget management, financial reporting and successful interaction with university boards or councils. The UK Leadership Foundation, launched in 2004 by Gordon Brown when he was Minister of Finance, illustrates well the importance given by a government to the effective operation of its universities in view of their expected contribution to the national development agenda.

Finally, it is ironic to note that, while accountability was initially resisted by universities in the name of autonomy, today's accountability requirements can be meaningfully fulfilled only to the extent that tertiary education institutions are actually empowered to operate in an autonomous and responsible way. Academic freedom and managerial autonomy is indispensable to the well-being of all societies. The successful evolution of tertiary education will therefore hinge on finding an appropriate balance between credible accountability practices and favorable autonomy conditions. Only then will tertiary education institutions be able to operate with agility and responsiveness, to enhance their efficiency, and to implement

innovative practices which should lead, ultimately, to better learning outcomes and greater labor market and social relevance.

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