Quality assurance and new public management: transformations in organizational structures, functions and roles in Argentine universities

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to study how quality assurance (QA) has impacted Argentina's higher education system, how QA tasks are reflected on the organizational structure of institutions, which kind of professional profiles the new QA staff assume and to what extent university life is reconfigured from these changes.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors draw on data from three work fields: collection and analysis of institutional data; survey applied to a stratified sample of staff who perform QA functions; and in-depth interviews with institutional QA professionals. Results show that universities have created specific areas and developed new functions and roles in QA.

Findings – The authors have observed a growing presence of dedicated personnel trained in developing these functions, positioned further down a path that had formerly distanced academics from administrative and institutional decision-makers. Unlike European universities, no evident tension was found between traditional sectors and the new professionals.

Research limitations/implications – The limited number of responses of the quantitative data collection technique (survey) only allowed for a general and descriptive analysis. This limitation is compensated with two other methodological processes (documental analysis and in-depth interviews), that allowed to incorporate "type of university" as a variable analyse the data obtained.

Practical implications – Results can be useful for public policy to move toward new forms of monitoring internal institutional QA systems.

Originality/value – The research that supports this article aims at constructing our own categories to understand the same object that has been studied in developed countries, but in the Argentine-specific context.

Keywords Quality assurance, New public management, Argentina, Higher education

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Within the framework of the new public management (NPM) paradigm, quality assurance (QA) in higher education is a global phenomenon that has been gaining strength since the late 1980s and early 1990s and that is now part of the public agenda. It has been associated with the financial crises that dismantled the welfare state and, at the higher education's system level, with the advance of a massification process that has led to an unprecedented proliferation of higher education institutions with diverse missions, profiles and qualities.

In Argentina, the enactment of the Higher Education Act in 1995 represented a significant change in the relations between the state and the universities, leading to the creation of the Comisión Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria (CONEAU – National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation). This had a prescriptive effect on the internal life of universities and has prompted a transformation of the traditional model of collegiate organization, with the introduction of managerial tools and processes, to respond to the state's QA agenda.

This paper analyzes how, after nearly 30 years, QA activities gained prominence in Argentine universities. Practically all universities have undergone institutional evaluations and accreditation processes of their programs. Today, more than half of the institutions have specific QA areas or units in operation.

Results from institutional documents, interviews and a survey of the personnel who perform QA functions in public universities are based on data obtained from an ongoing research [1] on the characteristics of QA units; their functions, positions and profiles; and their identity and relations with other administrative and academic actors. This poses several questions:

Q1. Is organizational and professional managerialism the way in which Argentine universities have responded to the external demand for QA?

Q2. How can these transformations coexist with the collegiate governance model, which is part of the roots of the Latin American university?

Q3. To what extent is it possible to make a synergy between traditional and newer roles to ensure institutional integration and not routinization?

Quality assurance in Argentina within the framework of the new public management paradigm

New public management and its impact on university quality assurance agendas

The NPM has its origins in the 1980s, when neoliberal administrative-managerial reforms were implemented in the public sector in developed countries (Maassen and van Vught, 1988; Barzelay and Armajani, 1992). The NPM paradigm is based on the basic principles of the "three E's" – economy, effectiveness and efficiency – under the argument that new ways of conducting public administration can satisfy the public's unfulfilled aspirations for good and responsible government (Barzelay, 2003). The NPM put forth the application of different processes, inherent to the private sphere, in the public sphere – such as strategic planning; management by objectives; project management; marketing; financial management; services; and information systems, and management control – mainly oriented toward the quantification and development of indicators. Likewise, it promoted the incorporation of managerial skills by developing techniques in leadership training and organizational change.

Several authors argue that European higher education reforms over recent decades may have been the result of a predominance of the NPM paradigm as a regulatory governance mechanism of public services in state agencies (Hood and Scott, 1996; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Deem, 1998). These reform processes were accelerated by the role that knowledge and innovation were expected to play in the economic development of contemporary societies (Bleiklie et al., 2012; Paradeise et al., 2009).

The NPM emerged as the opposite of the collegial governance model, which, until then, had prevailed throughout the history of university education in most of the world. The evaluative state has been studied as a new "remote control" relation between the state and the higher education systems involving the creation of QA agencies as intermediate bodies (Neave, 2009, 2012; Dill, 1998; Bleiklie, 1998).

In Latin America, the NPM appeared as a new state-modernizing school of thought during the 1990s and laid the foundations of higher education reforms supported by the World Bank's agenda and funding – i.e. directives aimed at responding to the processes of massive growth of higher education systems, with policies such as the promotion of growth in the private sector, institutional diversification and the implementation of QA systems (Bentancur Bernotti, 2000). As a result, most countries in the region developed their own national QA systems oriented toward the evaluation of program and institutional quality (Lemaitre and Mena, 2012).

Some studies conducted in developed countries have shown that these changes have affected both institutional governance models (Austin and Jones, 2016; Rowlands, 2013) and the relation between the state and higher education systems (Musselin, 2013).

European scholars have defined the new roles or spaces within the university that the reforms began to demand as "HEPROs" (higher education professionals) (Klumpp and Teichler, 2008), "para-academics" (MacFarlane, 2011) or "third space" (Whitchurch, 2012) – categories that refer to this new phenomenon of management and leadership in universities where QA is involved.

MacFarlane (2011) in particular analyzes the "disaggregation of academic life," a process in which new tasks have given rise to a brand-new role: that of the para-academic. For the author, para-academics are specialized in an aspect of academic practice and whose origin can be found in both the "overqualified" professional and the "disqualified" academic staff, who have been sidelined from the three traditional functions (teaching, research and service) and relegated to some, or even only one, of them. Klumpp and Teichler (2008), on the other hand, coined the term "higher education professionals" or "HEPROs" to examine this process in the German higher education system. Schneijderberg and Merkator (2012) and Kehm (2015) refer to this transformation as institutional responses to external changes, which produce tension between new and older academic roles.

These new roles require the kind of specialized knowledge needed for curriculum design for new student profiles, which goes beyond traditional teaching functions, or for online education, as is the case with the "e-learning coordinator." New research management functions have gained ground as well, such as writing projects to obtain grants, which involve the participation of a "research support officer," "business development manager" or "internationalization officer" to seek funds. The creation of new units, functions and positions in QA is part of the transformation of the higher education system in recent decades (MacFarlane, 2011).

This theoretical background might be applied, with proper adaptations, to Latin America and, specifically, to Argentina. Research supporting our work suggests the development of local categories as a medium-term objective (Marquina, 2020). The following analysis is

oriented along this path, placing the focus on the changes produced as a result of new QA requirements.

Evaluation and accreditation in the context of higher education reform in Argentina
The implementation of the 1995 Higher Education Act in Argentina was made possible through the Higher Education Reform Program, funded by the World Bank. Two of its six pillars dealt with QA: the Comisión de Acreditación de Posgrados (CAP – Graduate Accreditation Commission) and the Fondo para el Mejoramiento de la Calidad Universitaria (FOMEC – Fund for the Improvement of University Quality). This allowed for institutional external evaluation and accreditation of graduate programs, which constituted the first step toward the current Argentine QA system (Marquis, 2014). These initiatives would be later unified as part of CONEAU's tasks.

Once created and set into operation, the CONEAU began to acquire political centrality owing to its ability to distribute prestige among higher education institutions. In 1997, the CONEAU systematically implemented mechanisms of institutional evaluation and accreditation of undergraduate and graduate programs in all university institutions based on standards defined by the Council of Universities and ratified by the Ministry of Education. This experience, from its initial rejection by universities to its passive or proactive acceptance, has been studied in detail (Stubrin, 2010; Guaglianone, 2012).

Contrary to similar agencies in other countries, in Argentina, the CONEAU has concentrated several tasks related to QA (Aiello, 2017):

- External institutional evaluation of universities every six years, once authorized or recognized (article 44, Higher Education Act). The results of these processes take the form of "recommendations" with no implications on institutional operation other than improvement. These decisions are useful mainly for universities themselves in their strategic development processes (Fernández Lamarra *et al.*, 2013).

- Authorization and periodic accreditation of programs corresponding to courses related to professions regulated by the state and considered of public interest, as unregulated professional practice may pose a risk to society (article 43, Higher Education Act). The results of these processes are crucial for the continuation of the program, which can be accredited for six years, for three years with requirements or not accredited at all. These processes are a key determinant for the Ministry of Education, whose resolutions concerning the initial authorization and subsequent approval for the continuation of the programs are based on the CONEAU's decisions (Marquina, 2020).

- Authorization and periodic accreditation of all graduate programs (specializations, master's degrees and doctorates) (article 39, Higher Education Act). The results of these processes are crucial for the continuation of the program, which can be accredited for six years, for three years with requirements or not accredited at all. The CONEAU's decisions are therefore binding for the Ministry of Education's resolution with regard to the continuation of graduate programs (Barsky and Dávila, 2012).

- Annual evaluation of private universities for their provisional operation once authorized by decree by the executive branch of government, as well as their definitive recognition once the provisional period has elapsed (articles 62, 64 and 65, Higher Education Act).

• Feasibility assessment for the establishment of new universities (article 46, Higher Education Act). The CONEAU's decisions serve as basis for Congress's enactment of laws regarding the creation of new public universities.

To develop all these evaluation and accreditation tasks, the CONEAU has designed and organized work around a series of well-differentiated actors, whose functions converge to achieve the agency's purposes:

• board members (senior staff appointed by the president of the nation);
• management staff (professionals specially trained by the agency to contribute, from a managerial perspective, to the development of the agency's various tasks); and
• peer evaluators (university professors with a well-established career in a specific disciplinary field, who are occasionally called for evaluations).

The interplay of all these actors has led to the emergence of a new kind of knowledge of evaluations, concentrated in the agency and disseminated throughout the system (Marquina, 2017a). After more than two decades, substantive changes have taken place, coupled with bureaucratization and routinization processes, which have given rise to a certain homogenization of the decisions that have impacted on institutional responses (Marquina, 2017a, 2017b; Marquina, 2020). As a result, to effectively respond to QA requirements, universities created QA units or areas aimed at achieving good results on QA institutional performance. The effects of these processes, typical of the NPG, on the traditional form of university governance and the solid autonomy of Argentine universities have been widely studied. And, although at first this may have suggested a clash in university administration, recent studies show a degree of coexistence between both, the collegial and the managerial governance models (Marquina *et al.*, 2022).

Methods
To study the way in which QA processes impacted Argentine universities, we implemented a research strategy centered on qualitative and quantitative methodologies. For the first approach, we used two different techniques for data collection: documental research and in-depth interviews. For the second approach, we conducted a survey. We present below the sequential process in which these approaches were carried out:

Collection and analysis of institutional data
This includes the number of evaluations carried out by 70 public university institutions (among them, 63 national and 7 provincial universities), grouped according to seniority:

• until 1969, 10 universities;
• between 1970 and 1989, 21 universities;
• between 1990 and 2003, 12 universities;
• from 2004 to the present, 27 universities.

Periodization is based on government administrations with clearly differentiated policies in regard to higher education (Mendonça and Pérez Trento, 2020; Pérez Rasetti, 2014).

Institutional distinction by seniority is the main comparative variable throughout this study. In the Argentine university system, the situation of the oldest institutions, created before 1990, differs from those that were contemporary to or whose establishment followed the enactment of the Higher Education Act, mainly in aspects linked to the characteristics of

their institutional projects. In general, compared to old traditional universities, institutions created since the 1990s tend to be medium or small in size, with a more centralized organization and a strong prevalence of single-person, rather than collegiate, decisions (García de Fanelli, 1997). Therefore, institutional data were analyzed according to four types of institutions and their year of creation.

Institutions were also analyzed in regard to number and types of evaluations carried out:

- external institutional evaluations;
- accreditation of undergraduate programs (by number of years granted for the next evaluation); and
- graduate programs (specializations, master's degrees and doctorates).

This documentary work also included the identification of areas or units dedicated to QA in each of the seventy university institutions and their place in the organizational structure.

Survey applied to a stratified sample of the personnel who perform QA functions
We conducted an online survey of the personnel who perform QA functions in the 70 aforementioned public universities. The questionnaire was designed with 45 structured and closed-ended questions, some of them in a five-point Likert scale, and organized around five aspects:

(1) the characteristics of the units where they work;
(2) the functions performed;
(3) the position in the organizational structure;
(4) the academic/training profile; and
(5) the relations of the respondents with other university actors.

To ensure respondents understood the questions, a pretest was applied to five institutions, with ten responses obtained. The final sample corresponds to 250 people.

The survey was conducted on a national scale, including people working in QA units at universities and heads of QA areas in academic units, where QA functions are decentralized. People were invited to fill out their responses through the national network of QA units database, which was recently established in the country with institutional representation. Results are based on 120 obtained responses involving at least one person in charge of QA from each of the 70 institutions analyzed. The total number of responses only allowed for a general and descriptive analysis, because that amount prevents any possible comparison of data through specific variables based on a statistical analysis. this limitation was solved through the other methodological techniques (collection and analysis of institutional data, above, and In-depth interviews, below), where results by "type of university" – according to year of creation – are part of the qualitative data obtained. The quantitative research that supports this article is still ongoing, and it is part of a broader survey in which personnel from other university areas are surveyed and university managerialism is also studied.

In-depth interviews with institutional quality assurance managers
An in-depth qualitative investigation without a probabilistic perspective was chosen for our sample. The unit of analysis was delimited – personnel who work in QA units at public universities – for it was intended to capture the voices of these actors in relation to their professional experience.

This methodological approach was of an exploratory nature because the perceptions about the professional work of the individuals who perform these roles have seldom been studied (Marquina and Polzella, 2015; Marquina, 2020). Thus, in our interviews, we have identified perceptions based on a general vision, of an approximate type, of the object of study (Bernasconi and Rodríguez-Ponce, 2018).

An intentional sampling (Hernández Sampieri *et al.*, 2014) was used based on a criterion of belonging and according to type of institution; that is, two professionals from QA units per type of institution. Eight in-depth interviews were conducted around similar aspects of the survey. The analysis of the responses focused on identifying key points in the survey, although only common answers were selected for this article.

Given the number of interviews and the preliminary level of the ongoing research, data processing for the analysis of the responses was carried out manually, and it is complementary to the aspects described above (1 and 2).

Collected responses were examined and codified within the five aspects defined above. Next, groups of data were created to classify, analyze and establish relations among them.

CONEAU's work since its inception

In this section, we aim to show the magnitude of the work carried out by the CONEAU and its impact on universities in the three aforementioned areas (external institutional evaluation, accreditation of undergraduate courses linked to "public interest" diplomas and accreditation of graduate programs). We may argue that nowadays, after more than 25 years since the CONEAU's creation, all universities have undergone one of these processes, carrying out at least three institutional evaluations, more than two cycles of accreditation of graduate programs and up to two cycles of accreditation of undergraduate courses.

In relation to external institutional evaluation, the CONEAU has carried out 116 external evaluations since its creation, corresponding to an average of one evaluation per institution. Evaluations results – based only on recommendations and with no legal implications – show a growing process of incorporation into institutional improvement.

The area of accreditation of undergraduate courses has, as of 2021, accredited 1,230 courses in 21 training fields (agronomy, architecture, biochemistry, biotechnology, biological sciences, nursing, pharmacy, genetics, geology, informatics, engineering, natural resources engineering, forest engineering, zootechnical engineering, medicine, dentistry, psychology, chemistry, veterinary medicine, public accounting, law). Results, according to established regulations, may grant accreditation for six years (maximum qualification), three years (requires fulfillment of improvement commitments) or no accreditation at all.

The area of accreditation of graduate programs, on the other hand, has accredited 3,665 courses divided into 506 doctorates, 1,203 master's degrees and 1,956 specializations. In this case, results are differentiated by category (A, B or C, with A being "excellent" and C, "good"), and duration of accreditation is linked to the number of accreditation cycles passed (CONEAU, 2021).

In Table 1, results from our documentary research show that all institutions have had at least one institutional external evaluation, although the oldest universities have had almost twice as much (1.80 on average). This aggregated result does not show, however, that the University of Buenos Aires (established in 1821), despite having accredited many programs (Nosiglia, 2013), has not yet completed an external institutional evaluation.

The group comprising the oldest universities also has the highest number of accredited undergraduate programs (an average of 32 programs per institution), mostly with the maximum six-year qualification. There does not seem to be a difference between universities created in the 1970s and those established during the second wave of expansion in the 1990s.

Institutions according to period of creation	External institutional evaluations	Undergraduate programs with accreditation (Avg.)			Graduate programs with accreditation (Avg.)			
		Three years	Six years	Total	Doctorates	Specializations	Master's	Total
General average	1.1	6.9	7.5	14.4	9.5	38.2	24.7	65.8
Until 1970	1.8	10.9	21.4	32.3	27.4	115.8	68.5	188.5
Between 1970 and 1990	1.3	6.4	5.8	12.2	6.2	16.4	14.9	37.5
Between 1990 and 2003	1.2	5.8	2.0	7.8	4.0	16.0	13.2	33.2
From 2004 to present	0.2	4.4	0.9	5.3	0.4	4.6	2.4	3.8

Source: Authors' table based on data from the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU) (2021)

Table 1.
QA activity in public university institutions according to type of evaluation and institutional seniority

The 27 universities established since 2003 have hardly deployed institutional external evaluations. On average, they have accredited five undergraduate programs, mostly with a three-year accreditation scheme (Table 1).

Accreditation of graduate programs is also concentrated in the oldest universities with the highest number of specializations (116 on average), master's degrees (69 on average) and doctorates (27 on average). The most recently created universities are those with the smallest number of accredited graduate programs and an even smaller number of doctoral programs, with a few exceptions (0.4 on average) (Table 1).

These data demonstrate the great accumulation of work by the CONEAU in the oldest universities. Coincidentally, these are the largest universities, and they concentrate the highest number of undergraduate programs in professions of public interest, which are, therefore, accredited. They also have the highest number of accredited graduate programs. For their part, recently created universities, because of their size and their short seniority, have not yet developed as many programs as the previous group nor have they undergone institutional evaluations.

Impact of quality assurance on the internal life of institutions
Quality assurance areas created at the institutional level
With the creation of the CONEAU, universities in Argentina had to incorporate institutional evaluation and accreditation of academic courses into their management practices. In this sense, they began to create new areas destined to carry out these processes, along with new personnel profiles. Nevertheless, implementation was not uniform, and it assumed different modalities. We determined these variations from the analysis of the organizational structures and the survey conducted and contrasted this information with the interviews.

First, we identified a small group of institutions (five) that have created small commissions in charge of implementing processes of self-evaluation and external evaluation, which are then dissolved at the end of the task for which they were created. According to a person responsible for conducting external evaluations at one of these institutions: "This situation discontinues the institutional QA policy and conspires against mid-term, improvement-oriented processes because of the evaluation approach, without a strong commitment to QA." These institutions do not show consolidated QA units with trained personnel, and the different QA functions are spread across several areas or offices.

In most institutions that have incorporated QA into their organizational structures, there are differences associated with their history and institutional characteristics. The group of traditional universities (the oldest and largest) have incorporated new functions into the old existing structures. They have made few adjustments to this end, which, in general, are limited to changes in the names of existing areas, referencing the new functions. One person responsible for QA in one of these institutions claimed that "the name of the area has changed, but the main change is that the CONEAU's tasks have been added to our previous work."

Recently established universities have incorporated QA into their institutional projects from the very start, creating specialized units, although without following a uniform structure. According to the information gathered in the organizational structural analysis, these areas bear different names and have a variety of ranks and types of organization. Thus, there are secretariats, undersecretariats, coordination offices and units dedicated to QA that, in turn, differ in their degree of centralization/decentralization within the university and their integration into its functional structure.

Likewise, some institutions concentrate the functions related to the CONEAU in a single area, while others separate them, assigning institutional evaluation to a planning area and

accreditation tasks to an academic secretary or a secretary of graduate programs. There are also differences in the relation that each area maintains with the authorities and, above all, each area's functional proximity to the presidency or rectorate of the university. The latter is a prime example of the relevance that the university assigns to QA functions.

We have not, however, observed clear patterns that would allow us to identify that these modalities correspond directly to the different types of institutions based on their year of creation. It is possible to find similarities in the size of the institutions and the level of centralization in which the management of these processes is arranged. Even though we may observe that the smallest and most centralized institutions are also the youngest institutions, establishing some kind of association, we cannot identify this as a clearly differentiated quality among management models.

Another aspect to underscore, which was present in the interviews conducted, is that QA public policies contributed to the improvement of the information systems of Argentine universities, at least in those cases where several external institutional evaluations were implemented. The data required to carry out external evaluations forced institutions to improve the collection and availability of information, providing transparency to management. This was a consequence of both the CONEAU's activity and the creation of the University Information System (SIU) during the 1990s, dedicated to developing computer solutions to improve management of public universities. In this sense, a planning secretary in an old traditional university with more than two evaluation processes argued that:

> Thanks to having gone through several external evaluation processes, we were able to realize the value of the information generated for our decision-making. We were able to unify the strategic planning processes with those of external evaluations (which, at first, were addressed separately), and I was in charge of putting together a control panel with all the information, which for the authorities is currently the university's "spoiled child."

Improvements such as this might indicate an incipient development of institutional research tasks in universities. This can be observed more clearly in the few institutions that have recently carried out more external institutional evaluation processes. As stated by Pita Carranza and Durand (2018), these activities contribute to meeting the external demand for information and, internally, they produce data that constitute the knowledge base of the institutions themselves. Yet, our interviews reveal that the influence that external evaluations may have on the decision-making process still tends to be low and is dependent on the amount of leverage of the QA head. Although the Higher Education Act stipulates that institutions must ensure the operation of internal instances dedicated to information management, this activity is still limited and far from the experience of Europe and North America, where information management and institutional research is further developed and complements external evaluation processes (Aiello, 2017).

In sum, changes on organizational structures might vary according to the type of institution and the commitment of its authorities. This last aspect is decisive for the formation and support of specialized QA units. However, these are assumptions that are not clearly manifested in all institutions of the same "type." Therefore, we can affirm the existence of variations, but not in well-defined patterns.

Functions, profiles and roles of quality assurance professionals
The emergence of a new professional QA knowledge in Argentina originated in the national QA agency and involved the creation and training of highly specialized staff (Marquina, 2017a). Naturally, this knowledge was transferred to the institutions, which gradually

acquired it, through new specific areas or by hiring or training specialized personnel. In some cases, it was the CONEAU's own professional staff who was absorbed by the institutions. In other cases, teachers themselves took charge of the processes, mainly linked to the accreditation of programs, in accordance with the idea of disaggregation of academic life described by Macfarlane (2011). Other institutions began hiring consultants, and an institutional critical mass was created to carry out the newly required evaluation tasks. The new external demands made the university administration more complex and inaugurated processes of professionalization and specialization of personnel, which can be seen in the proliferation of academic graduate programs dedicated to the training of human resources on university management.

In this section, we lay out the results of the survey and the interviews carried out to characterize who are the new QA managers at universities. We present our results in relation to functions and positions; profiles and roles of QA professionals; and identities and interactions.

Functions and positions. New QA tasks undoubtedly require the assignment of new functions that are neither purely administrative nor strictly academic, nor related to institutional political responsibility. The tasks of evaluation and accreditation require knowledge and skills related to the presentation of evaluation reports and organization of information based on standards or guidelines that are defined externally. These tasks could be associated with administrative functions (form filling), whereas others may be associated with the disciplinary aspects of the courses, much more linked to academic knowledge.

Those who perform these functions decide how to best make presentations comply with standards or, in the case of institutional evaluations, with institutional missions and purposes. One of our interviewees, a QA professional at a university established in the 1990s, stated that:

> Sometimes I make decisions that only I can make, because I know what works or what doesn't in the presentation of a course for accreditation. Neither the secretary to whom I report nor the director of the course in question know that sometimes there are aspects that must be expressed in a specific way so that they are accepted. I explain these things to the academic or to the secretary so that they understand, but that is far from asking for authorization.

Individuals dedicated to these functions have a freedom of judgment that is uncharacteristic of the administrative sector, and they do not recognize that they carry out routine and regulated tasks. They differ, in this sense, from the traditional subordinated role occupied by the administrative officer. But, at the same time, there is a disciplinary knowledge, especially in the accreditation of courses, which implies a coordinated work with the academic sector. In addition, QA functions also border on the level of decision-making, because the way they are developed is crucial to endorse the quality of the institution and its programs.

Survey results show some characteristics of the position these professionals occupy, which is barely related to the role they perform. Mostly, they have a nonteaching position (44%). Only a little more than a third (35%) of our respondents claim to have a tenured position (which gives them permanent stability) or have prospects for continuation because of constant renewal (17.5%). Respondents stating that this position is the only job they have comprise less than half of the total (38.33%). There is another group that states that they carry out other functions at the same university (40.8%), i.e. a teaching position, and a smaller group that manifests having another job outside the university (20.83%). Also, evidence shows that they mostly meet a fixed weekly schedule (40.83%), with two smaller groups managing their time with flexibility (29.17%) or working by objectives (30%).

The role I play and the knowledge I have are key in my links with both authorities and teachers. To the former, I often advise or recommend certain decisions; for example, how to carry out a self-assessment or how to use accreditations results to produce some change. With teachers, in general, I have a good bond, since most of the time I do things that they should do if I were not there, and they see that as a help. Although, sometimes, my requirements to them, and also to administrative staff, are seen as an additional workload.

Interviewees also make a clear differentiation from the traditional administrative sector because of their autonomy and their nonbureaucratic functions. We observed that, when they speak of their "peers" or "colleagues," they refer to other people who occupy similar positions in the same or other institutions, with whom they have recently begun to establish a more formalized network:

Recently, several of us who perform similar functions in universities have been able to connect, and we have formed a more formalized network. This setting is great as an area for exchanging problems and good practices, and also for training and producing reports or papers for some conferences.

A clear identification with any of the traditional roles (teachers, administrators or authorities) has not been observed, even when respondents occupy formal positions as teachers, administrative staff or authorities. It was interesting to note that 46% of those surveyed argued that they carry out research in QA at their institutions (36%) or at another one (10%), which they consider to be somewhat linked to academia.

Discussion and conclusions

We have seen how the QA agenda in Argentina was introduced at three levels: at the public policy level in the 1990s, with the introduction of an act; at the intermediate level, with the growing presence of the CONEAU as the agency in charge of carrying out evaluation and accreditation processes throughout the university system; and at the institutional level, with the creation of specific units, the development of new functions and the emergence of new professionals working in QA.

There is no doubt that, in the past 25 years, institutions had to dedicate more time and efforts to QA. This has been observed in both the number of evaluations and accreditations performed and in the consolidation of specific areas, under different formats, occupying different spaces in the organizational structures. The growing presence of dedicated personnel trained in these functions reflects a similar trend to that studied by some European authors (Macfarlane, 2011; Whitchurch, 2012; Schneijderberg and Merkator, 2012), with roles positioned further down a path that, two decades ago, distanced academics from administrative and institutional decision-makers (Whitchurch, 2012). New QA professionals in Argentine universities, despite carrying out their functions in a variety of positions, and often with little stability, are qualified professionals under constant training and identify themselves as part of a transversal space in the university system. This may explain why they have been gaining institutional ground in a function that requires specific knowledge and higher workloads.

Although this subject deserves to be further studied with input from the different voices of university life, the results gathered from the perceptions of the new professionals demonstrate a recognition and value of the new roles by the authorities and a lack of tension, translated into delegation, between academics and administrators. This may be because the functions that need to be performed by relying on specific knowledge take an additional effort from each sector and, as a result, teachers and administrators are not willing to engage

in them. We are not in a position, for the moment, to ensure that a synergy exists between traditional and new roles, or that there is institutional integration or an absence of routinization. Nevertheless, we may state that the conflict around QA in Argentina during the 1990s remains in the past and that, unlike developed countries, where the literature shows tensions and conflicts in the redefinition of roles (Kehm, 2015), institutional transformations oriented toward QA, as well as professional managerialism, coexist today with the collegiate governance model, which is still part of the roots of the Argentine and Latin American university.

The analysis conducted allows us to conclude that QA practices in Argentina currently travel a path of incorporation into the daily life of universities, with variations in terms of integration with institutional purposes. Thus, the role of new QA professionals and the value placed on them by the authorities seem to be crucial for the commitment of the university to institutional improvement.

Future public policy reforms should focus on how institutions have developed internally to respond to QA requirements and to what extent these internal changes are limited to a formal response or real change. Within this framework, the role of QA professionals at the institutional level can also be key for the future of higher education reforms. Perhaps, from an institutional evaluation perspective, it is time for public policy to move toward forms of QA based on meta-evaluations; that is, the monitoring and evaluation of internal institutional QA systems.

In sum, global changes in higher education, in light of the new public management paradigm, have served as a context for the analysis of the Argentine university system. Research should continue to discover whether the growing presence of the managerial model will maintain a balance with the traditional collegiate one that characterizes Argentine universities or whether it will end up dominating institutional life with bureaucratic processes and far from the purposes of continuous improvement.

Note

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Appendix

Questions related to the position	#	(%)
Use of the time dedicated to QA tasks		
Fixed weekly schedule	49	40.83
I manage a number of hours per week w/flexibility	35	29.17
I work by objectives, without a specific weekly schedule	36	30.00
How many jobs they have		
I have only this job	46	38.33
I have another job at this institution	49	40.83
I have another job at another institution	25	20.83
Type of position		
Nonteaching position	50	41.67
Teaching position	27	22.50
Authority	40	33.33
Adviser with temporary contract	3	2.50
Working hours dedicated to QA or QA and other activities		
Only QA	46	38.33
QA and other activities	74	61.67
Type of contract	120	
Tenure	42	35.00
Interim/renewable	21	17.50
Interim without prospect of renewal	25	20.83
Temporary contract/per hour	32	26.67

Source: Authors' table based on own survey

Table A1.
Characteristics of the position

Questions related to the profile	#	(%)
Education level (only one option)		
Completed high school	4	3.33
Incomplete undergraduate education	6	5.00
Undergraduate degree obtained	18	15.00
Incomplete graduate education	29	24.17
Graduate degree obtained	63	52.50
Previous experience in a university setting (multiple options)	#	%
Did not have previous university experience	24	20.00
Had experience in other functions at another university	23	19.17
Had experience in other functions different from QA at my university	44	36.67
Had experience in QA functions at another university	14	11.67
Had experience in QA functions at my university	24	20.00
Had experience in similar functions in a public/government organization	24	20.00
Institutional value of QA training (1–5 Likert scale)		1–5
The university offers training opportunities regarding the functions you perform		3.49
The university offers funding to train you in QA		3.25
I can use part of my working hours to develop these activities		3.69
The university values my participation in these training activities		4.16
The specific knowledge for performing my functions is central		4.08
My profile requires to be continually training and updating		4.44

Source: Authors' table based on own survey

Table A2.
Profile of QA professionals

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