

## RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Universities must face increasing requirements arising from both the international setting and the requirements of the countries where they operate. A lot is expected of them, and every day it seems that more is demanded from higher education institutions the world over. There is expectation that universities ought to contribute significantly to the training of advanced undergraduate and graduate human resources, as well as to research, development and innovation, contributing in turn to promote and disseminate culture and territorial development, within a framework of quality and continuous improvement.

Evidence shows that universities operating in the same environment reach different results. Also, institutions with similar resources and capabilities achieve diverse results. Therefore, the main determinants of the future of these institutions are not only the generosity or hostility of the environment, its dynamism and complexity, nor the amount of resources and capacities. The decisions designed and implemented by the management at each level appear to have a larger relevance in the configuration of the strategic pathways to be followed by the universities.

Thus arises the importance of studying higher learning institutions in order to better know them and how they operate, and to be able to understand how different relations between input conditions and inner processes can lead to systemically differentiated results. Research in the field of universities could provide knowledge that could feed these institutions in order to improve its management practices, its input conditions and internal procedures. But, also, such knowledge could be very relevant for government officers to choose and determine public policies that contribute to reinforce the fulfilling of the essential roles of universities in the knowledge society, with the subsequent effects on the development of the countries.

In consequence, research in the field of the study of higher education institutions acquires utmost relevance. First, because all of that which helps the fulfillment of the university roles has intrinsic significance, as they are vital institutions for the progress of nations. Second, because the field of study is fully under construction since the existence of dominant paradigms is scarce and, rather, there are basic guidelines that deserve and require significant improvement. Third, due to the high sensitivity of the results to improvement actions, which implies that small findings can generate significant impact in the results.

The challenge consists in being able to approach the research processes with clarity, for which a first vital question consists in defining whether theory will be built or will be verified. Generally, the field of higher education institutions is in a building phase and one of discovery of new proposals or theories, rather than in a phase of testing and verifying the statistical pertinence of the findings. A second needed definition has to do with elucidating if the research will deal with describing situations, facts or variables, or if it will attempt to explain relations between them or predict their behavior. These questions are central in order that the designs of research, beyond being relevant, be pertinent to the purpose of each study.

Therefore, in the field of the study of higher education institutions, research should not necessarily, nor exclusively, be of the quantitative kind, focussing attention in ensuring the conditions of randomness that allow to make a quality statistical inference. On the contrary, theory building is usually based on qualitative methodologies such as, among others, semi-structured interviews, participation/action, observation and case studies where what is relevant is to identify situations, facts and/or variables to describe, explain or predict them. Only that such description, explanation or prediction is carried out with the logic of theoretical generalization and not that of statistical generalization.

The above does not preclude that studies be carried out with randomly chosen samples that allow statistical inferences for the population under study. Such research is relevant and its highest pertinence resides in the verification of previously elaborated theories. In turn, theoretical generalization does not require large randomly chosen samples, but conditions that allow the establishment of findings and plausible relations arising from a restricted but sufficiently significant evidence, in order to build proposals that could be validated.

There is an enormous space to advance in the field of higher education institutions, whether in their governance, their officers' decisions and procedures, their management, their resources and capabilities, and in every idiosyncratic feature of input or procedure that allows distinction between one and another organization, where elements exist that can be accounted, even partially, for the heterogeneity in the obtained results.

EMILIO RODRÍGUEZ-PONCE  
Universidad de Tarapacá