

# REGULATORY FRAMEWORK AND SUSTAINABLE UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENT: TENSIONS BETWEEN REGULATION AND UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY

Those responsible for public policies in higher education are concerned that educational institutions increase the efficiency and effectiveness with which they carry out their operations. Legislation affects university management and, consequently, regulatory frameworks —particularly those related to financing policy and quality— aim to prevent risks in the functioning of higher education systems.

In this context, social inequalities constitute a central concern of public educational policies, which explains why the financing of higher education is a recurring topic both in the academic agenda and in the public agenda. This situation is related to the presence of massive higher education systems with strong participation from the private sector. This reality is observed with particular intensity in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the recent expansion of higher education has generated new challenges in financing, regulation, and quality. Financing schemes have evolved from predominantly public systems toward mixed systems, in a context of global trends and national reforms, where the economic relevance of teaching and university research has increased.

These financing policies seek to improve the efficiency, quality, and equity of higher education through mechanisms that promote, by means of economic incentives, the alignment of objectives between governments and universities. Under these conditions, quality assurance has become an increasingly influential regulatory tool in higher education systems, since governments seek to create conditions for institutions to promote excellence in management and continuous improvement, assume responsibility for the quality of their educational offer, act with transparency in the use of public resources, and contribute to the economic and social development of countries.

As a result, accreditation processes emerge based on the accountability of higher education institutions. The development of norms and guidelines to ensure it allows countries and educational institutions to have a common and transparent framework for managing it. In this way, accreditation seeks to ensure that institutions respond to the changes and transformations of higher education systems, report on the fulfillment of their institutional projects, and review their forms of relationship with society, in order to become more flexible organizations.

But how is the regulatory framework related to the growing importance that regulatory entities attribute to sustainable university development? Universities must be efficient in the use of resources, but they must also respond to persistent social problems such as poverty, inequality, and inequity. Added to this are global challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, and global warming, as well as technological transformations linked to the advancement of artificial intelligence and new forms of knowledge production.

This scenario is reflected in the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations (UN), adopted in 2015, which establishes seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed at transforming social, economic, and environmental dynamics in order to ensure a sustainable future. In this context, universities acquire a strategic role as institutions that generate knowledge and innovation, contributing to the achievement of the SDGs.

However, in order to meet this challenge universities must manage the tension between regulation and university autonomy, addressing the challenges of sustainable development in a dynamic and comprehensive manner. This tension is particularly visible in higher education systems in Latin America, where institutions must respond to increasingly complex regulatory frameworks without losing their academic and scientific autonomy.

For this reason, the challenge for universities does not consist solely of complying with increasingly complex regulatory frameworks, but also of ensuring that these frameworks strengthen their capacity to contribute to the development of countries, to the reduction of inequality gaps, and to the general well-being of citizens. From this perspective, the contemporary debate must focus on achieving a balance between state regulation, institutional autonomy, and financial sustainability, an indispensable condition for universities to continue playing their role in knowledge generation and in the construction of more just and sustainable societies.

LUIS ARAYA-CASTILLO  
Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Chile  
FRANCISCA ORTEGA  
Universidad Miguel de Cervantes, Chile