

## Research Article

### AUTONOMY FOR A CONSTRUCTIVIST ASSESSMENT: THE CASE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ANGOLA

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Received 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020; Accepted 16<sup>th</sup> July 2020; Published online 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2020

#### ABSTRACT

The quality of higher education institutions (HEIs) action, when sought from the evaluation based on legal-formal autonomy scarcely develops the sustainability of socio-organizational autonomy, as a result of the unlinking specific institutional reality of the countries and socio-professional and academic trajectory of the actors, but linked to liberal instrumentalism and looking for areas of institutional comfort. This essay suggests discussing the influence of the autonomies, in order realizing of a constructivist evaluation, aiming to generate a pragmatic understanding about the autonomy-evaluation-autonomy cycle in HEIs in Angola. The study is based on a qualitative approach, reflecting a look at a concrete reality by describing the actors' practices, perceptions and ideas, including the interpretation of legal norms. The synthetic conclusion is that, as heirs to the identity of the only university held the subsystem monopoly for decades, despite the fact that they decided whenever they can and do, they rarely shy away from the culture of normativism, conditioning in some way emancipatory effects that evaluations ultimately pursue.

**Keywords:** Academic legitimacy, Autonomy, Decision-making, Evaluation.

#### INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to generate an understanding of the cyclical dynamics of autonomy-assessment, aiming to unveil the reach of legal-formal autonomy, regarding the effectiveness of initiatives of evaluation in the recreation of the individual autonomies of the actors of field with a view to sustainability of the decreed assessment. The history of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Angola is confused with the country's history. To the previous institution -, Agostinho University Neto (UAN), tasks of political scope were confused with the margins of autonomy. That situation will have slowed down the development of individual autonomies, due to the subjection of academic legitimacy to political-administrative. In terms of structure, the approach starts with a hermeneutics about the features that define autonomy to assess, as a normative assumption, followed by a foray into the assessment and development of autonomy, describing its effects on socio-constructivist processes. Finally, the effectiveness of autonomy is analyzed as a reflection of the national higher education policy (HE) driven by the country's history. Documentary analysis and revisiting the results of investigations carried out by the authors on the organizational culture of the Public University of Angola and institutional evaluation in the UAN allowed the elaboration of the present review centered on a penchant approach qualitative. It reflects a "look at social life as a logical development of ideal concepts" (DURKHEIN, 2010, p. 11) through the description of practices, perceptions and the ideas of the actors, including the interpretation of national norms as instruments that guide HEIs in Angola. The central intention of the research starts from the fact that an tended to be less rational then to become a rule of action for the future (DURKHEIN, 2010), whose characterization will be little understood by generations subsequent.

#### Autonomy to Evaluate as a Normative Assumption

Addressing the evaluation by linking it to the autonomy of the HEIs is equivalent to discussing whether autonomy contributes for an

emancipatory assessment, or if the assessment generates autonomy in action. Assertions possibly understood if school autonomy is interpreted as exercise through of their own competences "in the scientific, pedagogical, cultural, disciplinary, administrative and financial" (Decree n° 90/09, article 7). If the assessment assumes that, HEIs are "instances of generation, diffusion and application of knowledge through freedom of thinking and the plurality of critical exercises" (UMINHO, 1994), autonomy will tend to reflect itself as a construction of the actors based, either in the legal-formal dimension as in the social constructivism, while "freedom to recreate new knowledge and new practices that contribute to the expansion of the limits of knowledge" (MANUEL, 2013, p. 74). Although there is no national instrument to census the evaluative actions within the framework of ES, namely: a) assessments of access to ES; b) teacher performance evaluations; c) study recognition and accreditation assessments; d) assessments for authorization of courses; e) evaluations aimed at formalizing postgraduate courses (master's and doctorate degree); f) evaluations assessing the national relevance of courses, among others, they occur at the expense of formal determinism. Reference is made to some particular assessment instruments, such as Decree Presidential No. 82/16, April 18<sup>th</sup> establishing basic rules for the framework, in levels of quality, creation initiatives and performance of HEIs in Angola. Acts configured with the normative dimension of autonomy for indicating the approach or distancing from "legal assumptions" as a criterion, without focusing on the dimension constructivist of the institution itself - real assumption of practices by the actors of the field. That is, institutions and courses can be evaluated and legalized based on a check-list that induces the inference of the conformity of the proposed initiative, regardless of the perspective pragmatic approach deals, for example, with the functionality of the laboratories, teaching aptitude for higher education, administration and management aimed at the unpredictability of the production context and dissemination of knowledge. As evidence, the underlying logics can be pointed out to the references mentioned in the design of the so-called "quality levels of creation of higher education institutions" (Presidential Decree No. 82/16, April 18<sup>th</sup>, article 4), circumscribing registered and authorized initiatives. The latter specified in three qualification levels entangled by the quantification of the assumptions legal requirements for each educational device. Two reflections arise: (i) to what extent such

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benchmarks would contribute to de facto institutional autonomy, involving structures and actors? (ii) it would be the case to indicate the HEI to adopt practices and procedures that stimulate the actors of the field for a more autonomous intervention and committed to permanent improvement, to the satisfaction of the public?

Experience has shown emphatically that the focus for device quantification overlaps with the qualitative dimension of the processes that characterize the ES, such as the quality of the classes taught, the relevance and relevance of the investigations carried out and the coherence of school administration due to HE. National HEIs were granted autonomy (Decree no. 90/09, article 7), the substance of which institutional approach taken *avant la lettre* in the light of the decreed autonomy, constitutes only a drawing administrative and management proposed and made available (BARROSO, 1996). This autonomy has few possibilities to decide on ES emancipatory assessments, due to the unpredictability of the context surrounding the production and dissemination of knowledge, as differentiating parameters that embody the central mission of this type of institutions of the national education system. As "Institutional assessment processes can already be considered part of history in the context of higher education" (POLIDOR, 2000, p. 334), the competence of the holder of the executive of public HEIs to "order the institution's evaluation and provide for use of results" (Decree n° 90/09, point p, number 1, art. 45), presupposes the existence in institutions, according to Barroso (1996, p. 185), of built autonomy. Such represents a "game of dependencies and interdependencies that members of the organization establish with each other and with the surrounding environment and that allow structuring their organized action according to their own collective objectives". Only this reality will be able to generate a "differentiated from the assessment of student learning, even if both are very, related and even interdependent" (SOUZA, 2005, p. 32). The evaluation of learning, allows analyzing the development of learning and constitutes the central parameter to evaluate teaching work in a context in which, professionalism is seen according to Roldão (2005), in the dimension of the specificity of the function, of the specific knowledge for the exercise of activity, decision-making power and belonging to a collective body. Teaching work to be a reliable basis for understanding the level of satisfaction of students and target of HEIs in Angola within the scope of development programs institutional, its understanding implies referencing the teaching professionalism based on autonomy, competence and evaluation. The autonomy to evaluate reflects the power of choices founded on "individual autonomies and previous freedoms of the actors, as a mechanism of socialization by identification" (MANUEL, 2013, p. 26). It is under the prior identity of the institution and the socio-professional trajectory of the actors that anchors individual freedom and academic legitimacy to decide on the evaluation.

### Evaluation towards Developing Autonomy

The instruments of quality analysis or organization of evaluation processes assumed unveil functionalist prominence - driving teams based on roles (Rectors, deans, heads of departments, etc.), contrary to the option for teaching categories (teachers, assistants, etc.), or academic degrees. A harbinger of the rarity of the rule of teaching professionalism and the construction of assessment instruments based on the rule of civil servants, unable to ensure constructivism and organizational emancipation. In this regard, Mendes (2016) warns about the inversion of positioning in the teaching career, which results from the call for administrative criteria for career progression. Way of proceeding to justify the existence in the Angolan HEIs, professors with lower degrees (graduates) in the top categories and others with top academic degrees (PhDs) in the initial career

categories (Trainee Assistant and Assistant). A degenerating scenario and potential disarticulation of fundamentals of possible evaluation proposals institutional or teaching performance because, "this reality may contrast with the assumptions inherent in peer reviews and, when considering the position in the career, as a parity criterion, academic legitimacy and scientific knowledge of those involved in the process" (MENDES, 2016, p. 19). In the same perspective, Manuel (2013) mentions examples of inversion of positions in structures, using statements such as: "the practice has not been as required by law [...] who is head of department to not fall below the category of someone who is your subordinate" (MANUEL, 2013, p. 421, XCEB subject discourse). For the author this highlights the degree of architecture that is not only non-conforming with the ideal of evaluations, but it also mitigates the relevance and prevalence of the institution itself. Regarding academic legitimacy, Manuel (2017) questions whether the fact that teachers with top academic and career-based degrees do not make use of the rules on the exercise of leadership positions in ES as an adaptation mechanism? Standards require greater ownership academic and the experience resulting from history is an inversion of bureaucratic hierarchy in functions in view of the technical career hierarchy.

Three reflections are added to the scenario described: initially, the design of indicators objectively verifiable organizational performance that allows the appraiser to strive performance and the evaluator to collect the evidence. Second, the evaluative hierarchies due to administrative functions, are rarely configured with the technical-scientific contribution held by the appraiser, and in some cases, the appraiser is distinctly incompetent to do so, either by the lower academic degree, or by the high standard of technical-scientific performance of the evaluated. Thirdly, the alleged assessment indicators defined by consultancies significantly mitigate the emancipatory and solidarity sense that is expected to HEIs. Within this framework, a constructivist end is scarcely sought, as the concept of autonomy detach themselves from their ownership and their impact. Eventually, the "rarity of autonomy of the decision maker, who becomes the plaything of the dominant social forces against which he cannot decide" (MENY & THOENIG, 1992, p. 130), on the one hand, and on the other, to the ambivalence of decisions which can constitute "a timely mechanism for the creation of feudalities [...] of discrimination or externalization of some actors from school boundaries" (ESTÊVÃO, 2003, p. 87) remind evaluation as an organizational mask.

The effects of the assessment, formally decided and piloted in a functionalist perspective, have few possibilities towards developing socio-organizational autonomy as a "process of submit to types of public administration less dependent on the State areas of activity until then subjected to more nationalized types" (FORMOSINHO *et al.*, 2005, p. 25). Just this one dimension is able to establish an emancipatory evaluation, because as a reference Nagel (1986):

The construction of a society is for all men and not only for the powers public. Wait for rules, guidelines, advice on how it should be thought and this new man from society and at school is the attitude of those who do not know how history is constituted, it is the attitude of those who do not want society to be transformed (p. 10). This process forces a subordinate unit to send for seeking approval from the guardianship, translating a normatively regulated power, descending from a practice experienced, which fits the so-called "practice authorization process". This is, understood as a process through which a higher hierarchy structure defines and puts into practice the norms that support the exercise of authority by a specific agent (SCOTT, 1999). In this way, according to Mendes (2013, p. 223), "organizations are given greater freedom to change their practices,

requiring a posteriori their legitimacy by upper unit". Based on these assumptions, the evaluation represents a construction and positive transformation of institutions, balancing organizational power, slowing down the leadership and the expression of hegemonic groups and the overlapping of the actors' options to the mission institutional and collective aspirations. This dimension of the political model allows HEIs to "control actions within the school and the classroom "giving way" to existing tensions, resistances and contradictions in the dispute for technical/political control of the school "as a consequence of the scarcity of resources and emergence of interest groups. HEIs in seeking to reinforce their social legitimacy (re) creating) institutional missions and configuring assessments based on decreed autonomies, when the necessary constructed autonomies, such as "if, teaching the dog to speak, it speaks", it tends to (re) create institutional vulnerability. Proposals for evaluation and strategic planning respond immediately to formal agendas, without paying attention to the fundamentals organizational consequences arising from the conscious assumption of processes by the respective actors. Thus, "the essence of an assessment with a sense of interiority" (MENDES, 2013, p. 263) is mitigated by the extra-institutional imposition, making the assessment the fulfillment of formal tasks with no emancipatory meaning and institutional commitment. The political perspective of organizations when closing these that make conflicts inevitable due to the imbalance of power, in particular, makes the assessment, taken as management and administration instrument, has the potential to allow the manifestation of: scarcity of resources; generation of interest groups; disagreements between individuals and groups; formulation of objectives based on negotiations and emergence of conflicts (BOLMAN & DEAL, 1989).

A kind of decisional *laissez-fair* is related to the fact that, in the teaching access and graduation (Decree No. 3/95, March 24<sup>th</sup>), a wealth of devices that would allow to substantially assess the performance of an ES teacher. But because the imprecision of the evaluation indicators, the process is pleased with the "evidently" as it is learned from the following recognition: "advance the first, the oldest, whatever more time of service and often who graduated first [...] age also counts" (MANUEL, 2013, p. 421, XCELG subject discourse extract). This set of ambiguities resulting, frequently, of the lack of objective evaluation indicators that a business consultancy institutional assessment rarely awakens to this non-conformity. Regarding ambiguities, resulting from inconsistency and/or absence of clear criteria, Mendes (2013), when characterizing the evaluation of teaching performance at UAN, states that, in many cases, this occurs based on diffuse appraisals by peers who know or maintain some direct contact with colleagues, allowing them to express opinions on the their performance. Practice that can accentuate the subjectivity implicit in the evaluation, reducing its rigor, nullifying the possibility of developing socio-organizational autonomy, as a basic condition for self-management and "exterminating" sequentially, the pedagogical sense of the evaluation and its potential for socio-organizational transformation. Whether "the evaluation object is only an instrument to provide evidences towards judgment of the decision maker" (OLIVEIRA & FARIAS, 2008, p. 11), the autonomy will express the involvement of everyone in the evaluation, as informants and participants in events towards socializing the results. This allows overcoming the causes of the failures presented and enhances the good practices and consequently the good results. Evoking the causes and not the failures as objects of overcoming reveals the adjustment to the circumstances and agendas of actors who generated along the way, new purposes as they support the neo-institutionalist perspectives (MANUEL, 2013). For this reason, the surrounding circumstances have the potential to generate decisions, a priori, considered important and sufficient but inappropriate for the new and future organizational contexts. Reality that, commonly,

values focused results, albeit without, or with little organizational relevance, when the effects collateral, not planned, are so much more relevant.

### Autonomy as a reflection of national Higher Education Policy

Inherited from colonization as yet another "symbol" of revolutionary self-government, Public University assumed formal autonomy evident under Decree No. 37/80 (article 1<sup>o</sup>), becoming a manager of the national ES until the emergence of Decree no. 90/09 (General Regulatory Standards). As autonomy is also a social construction, it was not enough its legislation, therefore, suggested that organizational actors explore the margins formal and legal to prevent dynamics such as evaluation and strategic planning from being taken from the instrumental perspective of career grading or rank status and, sparingly, in the emancipatory perspective of organizational recreation. The evaluative experiences cited by Mendes (2013), in his study on "evaluation of quality and higher education in Angola", point to formalized processes internal and external to the only Public University at the time (UAN) which, in practice, oversaw national ES responsibilities. These experiences seemed more, as manifestation of normative autonomy, since the evaluation, as considered by the author, was a field in which the institution "was devoid of experiences and practices" (MENDES, 2013, P. 112). Justification is structural and demanded by the actors who piloted the processes, thus, for such experiments it was still too early to evoke autonomic consequences. They competed in a tenuous way for the development of socio-organizational autonomy, despite to potentially awaken "employers and society in general" from their "role determinant in the assessment of the pertinence and relevance of the training provided" (MENDES, 2013, p. 265), except for reification of the intended organizational image to expose to society. Even so, HEIs never stop looking for the quality of their provision through acts, assessment practices and processes, including stratagems of agreeing assessment as leviathan of non-predefined processes, "as if weighing several times, the chicken increases from Weight". Whether on the one hand, the evaluation requires, in addition to legal-formal autonomy, autonomy as an assumption of self-management, resulting from collective learning and expression of power of each actor, on the other, the evaluation conceived as a collectively constructed process, with wide margins for the effective participation of land actors, opens space for the consistency of institutional processes and results.

In fact, the history of the autonomy of HEIs in Angola is confused due to the grant to the only university of the country (UAN) at the time, with specific powers of tutelage, which was interpreted as autonomy. Resuming the nuances of autonomy evoked by Neave and Van Vught (1994), who mobilized Berdahl's arguments (1990), this picture did not even reflect the substantive autonomy, nor procedural autonomy, since it does not allow to infer what the university was in fact (the "what" of academe), a teaching, research and extension entity or as it was in fact (the "how" of academe), an environment of interaction between professionals gym. The university started to be confused with political instances of the State, legitimizing the call for evaluation criteria of a political-administrative nature. Despite the formal recognition of the autonomy of the HEIs, by Decree, "in the scientific domains, educational, cultural, disciplinary, administrative and financial" (Decree n<sup>o</sup> 90/09, December 15<sup>th</sup>), its consubstantiation initially passes through a decentralized administration institutions and sequentially, by developing individual awareness of participate in decision-making processes. Political image capable of guaranteeing virtue expectation of the evaluations ordered in accordance with paragraph p) of number 1 of article 45, in the within the competence of the holder of the executive body of public HEIs. The format of decreed autonomy, however, involves the balance of powers

engendered by structural autonomy and individual autonomy, thus justifying the transitory decision of the UAN that, according to Mendes (2013, p. 54), "continued in practice, the perform this task" of evaluating and commenting on academic degrees, even after having the National Institute for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (INAES) was established. Normative autonomy was insufficient to develop actions within the scope of the new structural determinism shaped by the guidelines for improving ES management, as long as human resources were not, organizationally endowed. This context points to a scarcity of the individual autonomy of the actors, following the "History of the country and its institutions" which, due to the existence of "unifying patterns that allowed, to fully practice the decreed autonomy" (MANUEL, 2013, p. 209), awarded little the social administration of freedom and individuality. Thus, decisions about evaluations of teaching performance, organizational performance or innovation institutionalized by strategic planning, come up against media responses to justify itself before national, international or transnational entities to whom it is intended beg some consideration.

The reference that, "what is expected to be achieved through evaluation, is the diffusion of institutions that have quality, courses that have quality, courses that have more acceptance in the labor market (MENDES, 2013, p. 418, subject discourse XXTHM), expressed the little possibility that the evaluation so thought, develop the autonomy of its actors. These become hostage to utilitarian responses from the compliance forum and will be unable to express themselves with relevant autonomy, due to the previous freedoms built in their socio-professional and academic paths. When the liberalist foundations find in the evaluation an arena for the actors of the Institutions justify their pertinence and their utilitarian relevance, the sense of emancipatory solidarity of the assessment takes on instrumental significance due to the hiatus between normative and constructivist autonomy. Both sources of "Democratic development of the school institution" (TORRES, 2011, p. 92) define, respectively, the organizational actors' room for maneuver in the face of processes and with based on the states' agenda for higher education and directly reflect learning from the socio-professional and academic trajectories of the organizational actors.

The firmness of the national higher education policy based on the rational decision-making model "little attention to the individual and social facets that characterize education" (MANUEL, 2013, p. 396), somewhat slowing down the development of socio-organizational autonomy, as a mechanism for reformulating intervention in the action plan. This means that, in evaluation and strategic plans, the constraints that characterize the whole national institutions that take bureaucratic procedures as a source of homogenization, result in organizational distortions, as bases of consensus, end in organizational armor and, as loyalty structures, (re) creating organizational culture of no questioning. For decades, the unique university and embryo of the national HE, it was "not only a space for dissemination of knowledge and scientific debate, high training of technicians and cadres", but an entity of "cultural revival and ideological formation" (SILVA, 2004, p. 434). Parameters that characterize the previous generations of the subsystem and that are, representatively, the administrators and managers of the current HEIs. Within this framework, develop autonomy, as a "field for updating guidelines pedagogical policies and perspectives" (SARMENTO, 2011, p. 7) goes through "understanding by part of the actors of institutional constraints" (MANUEL, 2013, p. 206) that restrain or they prevent the full exercise of their action, because autonomy does not exist outside of it. At the However, the ES to conform as a subsystem of the national education system starting egalitarianism towards its actors, essentially, when they proceed,

representatively, of general education subsystems, or graduate and post-graduate in micro-sociological fields of education. Although the norms repeatedly evoke the expression "autonomy", its manifestation in the field of decision-making theories implies the existence of a decentralization of educational administration, in spite of the policies and intentions present themselves, manifestly opposite. So, the need to understand that autonomic decisions in HE are considered as the immediate consequence of the historical and structural precedence of education in general and HE, especially.

Therefore, "changing the purposes is not enough to change the results of the action", since, only the constructed character of change, can build the "models of organization and action collective actions" (RAMOS, 1996, p. 193). Because the autonomy decreed as unifying matrix decision-making practices, calls for the response of the actors in the action, for the fact that self-government as a faculty that individuals or organizations have to be governed by their own rules (BARROSO, 1996) imply choices that preserve organizational integrity in view of its mission. Because, the autonomy not to exist outside the intervention of the actors, constitutes a socio-organizational acquisition tending to manage and guide the structures in which the actors and groups act "according to their own laws" (BARROSO, 1996, p. 17), without ending in organizational feudality, understood as a mechanism of avoidance of hegemonic groups that turn institutions into their homesteads (MANUEL, 2013). The experiences of institutional assessment and strategic planning carried out by some HEIs represent a mere production of documents, or even mere compliance with suprastructural guidelines because it is not possible to read the ownership of processes by the actors and the transformation of practices as responses to initiatives. For example, having analyzed the action of Katyavala Bwila University for the period 2013-2023, can be noted some systematic planning inaccuracies, such as the objectives indicate disconnections with the activities and indicators formulated. It reflects the impossibility of execution of tasks that allow to achieve the objectives from the measurement of the indicators. As a consequence of the existence of poorly lit areas in school organizations (GUERRA, 2002), performance evaluation, for example, essentially in institutions public administration, is conditioned by administrative logics in terms of consequences. This is due to the fact that the decision, the decision-making process and the discourse allow (re) create legitimacy (BRUNSSON, 2006). Decisions delegate and distribute responsibilities, decision-making processes are designed to reinforce or weaken legitimacy. If understood as an antechamber for promotion, performance evaluation occurs only in instrumental way, such as production of administrative pieces that are attached to the processes of candidates approved on scientific councils of the institutions. In cases of aversion to the framework, covert administrative acts are triggered in performance evaluation processes to legitimize previously made decisions. It is within the scope of institutional development that strengthens performance evaluations as a mechanism compliance of parameters dictated by consultants in the face of frantic search for status in rankings, because in the pragmatic dimension little, if any, effect. Strategic planning as mechanisms for reviewing and appropriating procedures, principles, philosophy and organizational mission remain, a kind of justification that, "planning is being done". All because, the decision process on the planning, it deviates from the decision obtained "the plan", due to the absence of a process maturation, sharing and collective construction. It is more like a checklist of cockpit, contrary to the joint construction preceded by a phase of thinking and strategic collaboration. The institutional trust logic that has legitimized the evaluation architectures institutional and performance aspects, as well as strategic planning experiences, have been strengthening the hierarchies of the HEIs, creating the image of strong institutions.

However, the explicitness of hierarchies in a social environment leads individuals and groups to manifestly approach the dominant pole. "They seek to become much more than they were and more than others" (MOSCOVICI & DOISE, 1991, p. 121), reflecting a kind of fidelity which does not already represent an institutional assumption of processes, but a process of socialization by identification.

## Conclusion

The decisions that are taken around whether or not to carry out evaluations cover, first of all plan, the normative and imperative dimension of the accounting forum. Well, it appears as an accountability mechanism and scarcely as an expression of emancipation organizational structure. It is the legal and formal agenda that determines the performance of evaluations, at most, the voluntarism of hegemonic groups in the perspective of generating an image that go against formal expectations, even though daily life contradicts that same image. Experiences such as those for developing institutional development program (PDI) are positive initiatives that can be awaken the need to revisit the practices of the actors when the indicators that are they allow to measure positive changes, contrary to indicators that, with they are often an amalgamation of desires with meaning evident on sheet of paper. The configuration of a national HE evaluation system in Angola remains inscribed in the within the scope of the powers of tutelage, to which the HEIs must, within the scope of formal legal autonomies, build a dynamic of appropriation of this formal agenda. The institutionalization of an evaluation and quality assurance policy, as a means of strategic organizational management device, by not being limited to the fulfillment of mere legal formalities and symbolism can indicate the development of socio-organizational autonomy in its substantive and procedural dimensions. The gap between legal and administrative autonomy and socio-organizational autonomy is related to the political voluntarism of the State in matters of regulation therefore, this autonomy is always relative and conditioned, not immediately reflecting the dynamics of actors on the ground. The conception of organizations in an eminently rationalizing perspective processes, legitimate social problems, often the confusion between functions and identities. That is, the HEIs can stick by normative autonomies, to carry out evaluation actions but, in the consequently, they will have little chance of developing their autonomic identity.

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