

An Extensive Literature Review on the Predominant Conceptualizations of Quality in Higher Education and Its Main Components¹

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Given the multidimensional nature of the notion of quality and its growing relevance in higher education, it is necessary to lay the foundations for conceptualizing it in terms of its context of application, in order to provide support and consistency to the design of specific policies. This paper presents the main methodological guidelines and findings of an exhaustive literature review focused on identifying the conceptions of quality in higher education in papers published in high-impact journals between 2016-2020. Following the axial guidelines of the PRISMA-P method, 186 articles were selected out of 53,290 identified as part of the initial universe. Using open deductive coding, prevailing conceptions of quality of higher education and its valued components were identified. A crucial question arose as a consequence of the analysis of those articles: who is responsible for determining the quality of a product or service in higher education? The answer to this question gave rise to the emergence of an alternative theoretical and conceptual positioning to those that predominate in the specialized literature.

Keywords: higher education, quality, literature review, state of the art, Prisma-P method

INTRODUCTION

The current academic production focused on the problem of defining the concept *quality of higher education* and its main components, of great theoretical, political and practical relevance, is extensive and very wide-ranging in its approaches and strategies of theoretical and/or empirical approach. In this connection, the objective of the study described herein was to determine and analyze the current state of such production, as a basis for a conception of the *quality of higher education* that is appropriate to its context of application and fruitful for the development of policies in this field. That is to say, that the objective is not limited to itself, but is placed at the service of a situated conceptual construction, whose relevance and usefulness are based on the knowledge of the current academic production on this subject.

Quality is a concept that has acquired remarkable prominence, relevance and ubiquity in several areas of contemporary industrialized societies, including higher education, where it has been a source of interest and analysis for at least four decades (Avci, 2017; Lomas, 2002; Nabaho, Aguti and Oonyu, 2019; Saarinen, 2010; Van Vught and Westerheijden, 1994; Wittek and Kvernbekk, 2011).

However, its polysemic (Scharager, 2018) and often vague or ambiguous (Goff, 2017) nature continues to offer difficulties to any initiative to design and evaluate educational systems, plans, programs and organizations. Indeed, the extensive literature on the concept of *quality in higher education*, far from having led to a precise and widely accepted definition, reveals the great difficulties that hinder the fulfillment of

this claim (Matei, 2016; Pompili, 2010; Prisacariu and Shah, 2016). This situation has led to a process of semantic oversaturation and, paradoxically, deflation of meanings (Acevedo, 2011), especially because it is a concept in constant change and not susceptible to univocal interpretation (Zepke, 2014). But the paradox is only apparent; if multiple perspectives and meanings of *quality* are admitted, the concept becomes less useful as a tool for change, or even meaningless.

In any case, although *quality* continues to be a complex notion with a variety of meanings and applications, explaining its characteristics by appealing, as some experts have attempted to do, to its subjective nature (Municio, 2005), does not contribute to the elucidation of the concept and its multiple meanings and significances. This character does not necessarily invalidate -nor should it- the achievement of a specific definition adjusted to the context in which the concept is applied (Acevedo, 2008; Prisacariu and Shah, 2016; Reeves and Bednar, 1994), even if it is recognized that even in the same school organization there is rarely a definition sufficiently agreed upon by its actors (Mendoza and Ortégón, 2019; Pompili, 2010). There is not even usually a specific definition of the *quality* concept in the documents of entities whose mission is to ensure quality in higher education institutions; in fact, as Goff (2017) states, although these documents propose quality indicators and metrics, they do not provide a definition or a description of their meaning, a task that is generally left to each organization.

In the field of higher education the concept of *quality* is highly controversial (Acevedo, 2008) and complex (Acosta, 2015; Cabrera, 2005; Cardoso, Rosa, and Stensaker, 2016; Harvey and Green, 1993; Larrauri, Espinosa, and Robles, 2015). Its nature has been highlighted as ubiquitous and, as different groups of agents attribute various meanings to it, elusive (Cheng, 2014; Goff, 2017; Gvaramadze, 2008; Harvey and Green, 1993; Nabaho, Aguti, and Oonyu, 2019; Neave, 1986; Newton, 2002, 2010; Prisacariu and Shah, 2016; Weenink, Aarts, and Jacobs, 2018). In many works it is also described as a multidimensional concept (i.e., Avci, 2017; Barreto and Kalnin, 2018; Brunner, 1992; Elton, 1998; Green, 1994; Harvey and Green, 1993; Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems, and Van Hout, 2013; Krause, 2012; Nabaho, Aguti, and Oonyu, 2019; Reeves and Bednar, 1994; Sarrico, Rosa, Teixeira, and Cardoso, 2010; Scharager, 2018; Toranzos, 1996; Vesce, Cisi, Gentile, and Stura, 2020; Westerheijden, Stensaker, and Rosa, 2007), dynamic (Boyle and Bowden, 1997; Ewell, 2010; Harvey 2005; Westerheijden, Stensaker, Rosa and Corbett, 2014) and relative, as it depends on how it is perceived and conceptualized by different actors in the field (Baird, 1998; Cardoso, Rosa, Videira and Amaral, 2018; Green, 1994; Harvey and Green, 1993; Harvey and Newton, 2007; Harvey and Williams, 2010; Middlehurst and Elton, 1992; Mortimore and Stone, 1991; Newton, 2010; Scharager, 2018; Welzant, Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, and Crawford, 2015; Wittek and Kvernbekk, 2011).

These unique characteristics of the concept of *quality of higher education* inhibit the possibility of the existence of a definition that is generally accepted in the international academic community. Almost two-thirds of a century ago, about three decades before it began to establish itself as an axial notion in higher education, Gallie (1956) described it as an essentially contested concept. The rich and very diverse academic output published in the last four decades reaffirms this perception, although the challenge has been nourished by increasingly different grounds.

In its application to higher education a challenging level, pointed out by various authors (among others, Filippakou, 2011; Newton, 2002), has been the recognition that this concept is part of a power struggle in which the adoption of certain conceptual definitions reflects a competition for a better academic positioning. Blanco (2013) has emphasized that the *quality* concept participates in a peculiar symbolic field that is used as a regulatory framework for discourses, policies and practices. That is the reason why, as Monarca and Prieto (2018) have stated, it is a field that contains disputes about how to understand educational institutions and organizations, their functions and relationships with other spheres of the social world, including the state. Their influence on the direction of educational policies and practices is therefore very significant. It is therefore necessary to study how it intervenes as a relevant concept in decision-making processes, especially in the design of higher education policies. In this connection, it is worth stating again what Prisacariu and Shah (2016) pointed out: *quality* is never a neutral concept, but inescapably responds to a tacit idea about higher education, about its meaning and purpose, its values and underlying ideological assumptions.

The difficulties in reaching a generally accepted definition of the *quality* concept are further increased by the inclusion of another circumstance that refers, more than to the concept itself, to the context of its application: is it appropriate to take into consideration the *quality of education* or the *quality in education*? Although both concepts are often used interchangeably (and in English under the generic expression “*quality in higher education*”), some experts make a distinction. Pérez-Juste (2005), for example, considers that the concept of *quality of education* focuses on the objectives of education, while the concept of *quality in education* focuses on the processes and factors necessary to achieve quality results: management and administration, human and material resources, and evaluation. *Quality of education* is thus a broader concept than *quality in education* (Rodríguez-Morales, 2017).

The following section will outline the principal methodological guidelines applied in an exhaustive literature review focused on identifying the definitions and conceptions of *the notion of quality in higher education* present in recently published academic articles. In the following sections, some of the main results obtained will be described and discussed in an attempt to put into context the current state of the art on the issue. As a conclusion, the theoretical-conceptual positioning of the authors of this text will be explained and the implications for the field of higher education of the results emerging from the literature review will be highlighted. Finally, the main limitations of the study conducted and the lines of continuity and further analysis that could be potentially fruitful will be mentioned.

REVIEW OF THE CURRENT INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC PRODUCTION REGARDING THE CONCEPTION OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

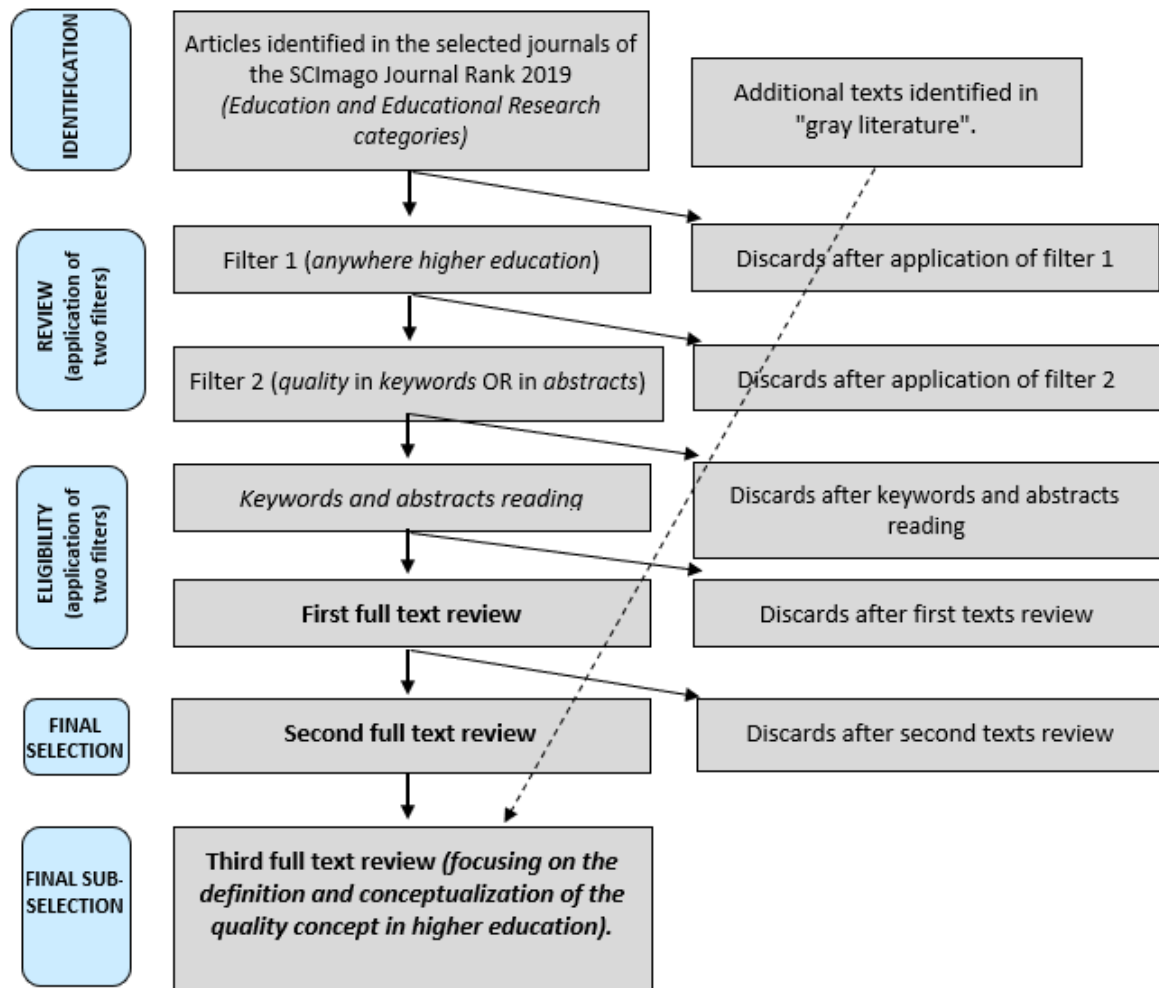
In order to establish, in the current international scientific literature concerning the subject of *quality in higher education*, a state of the art focused on identifying the predominant conceptions of this notion and its main components, an exhaustive literature review was carried out. It is our belief that the results of this review will provide a firm foundation on which to base a conception of the *quality in higher education* that will be useful and suitable for the development of educational policies and programs in this field.

The literature review was developed based on the fundamental guidelines of the PRISMA-P method formulated by Moher et al. (2009), later adjusted by Shamseer et al. (2015) for systematic reviews and meta-analyses. The sequence of the review is shown in Figure 1.

The search for articles was limited to those published in the period 2016-2020 in a selection of the 1,272 journals in the 2019 *SCImago Journal Rank* “*Education*” and “*Educational Research*” categories (hereafter, SJR-2019).

The selection of the journals was based on the appropriateness of their name to the thematic focus considered. As a result, 260 journals were selected, 80% of them published in English: 88 of the 306 journals in the Q1 quartile, 70 of the 307 in the Q2 quartile, 56 of the 304 in the Q3 quartile, 35 of the 293 of the Q4 quartile, and 11 of the 62 uncategorized journals. Of the 260 journals selected, 60% were from the UK (92) and the USA (64). (The rest are distributed among the following countries: Spain (25), the Netherlands (15), Brazil (7), Australia (6), Switzerland (5), Turkey (5), Mexico (5), South Africa (4), Canada (3), Poland (2), Russia (2), Malaysia (2), New Zealand (2), Colombia (2), Chile (2), and 17 other countries with 1 journal each.

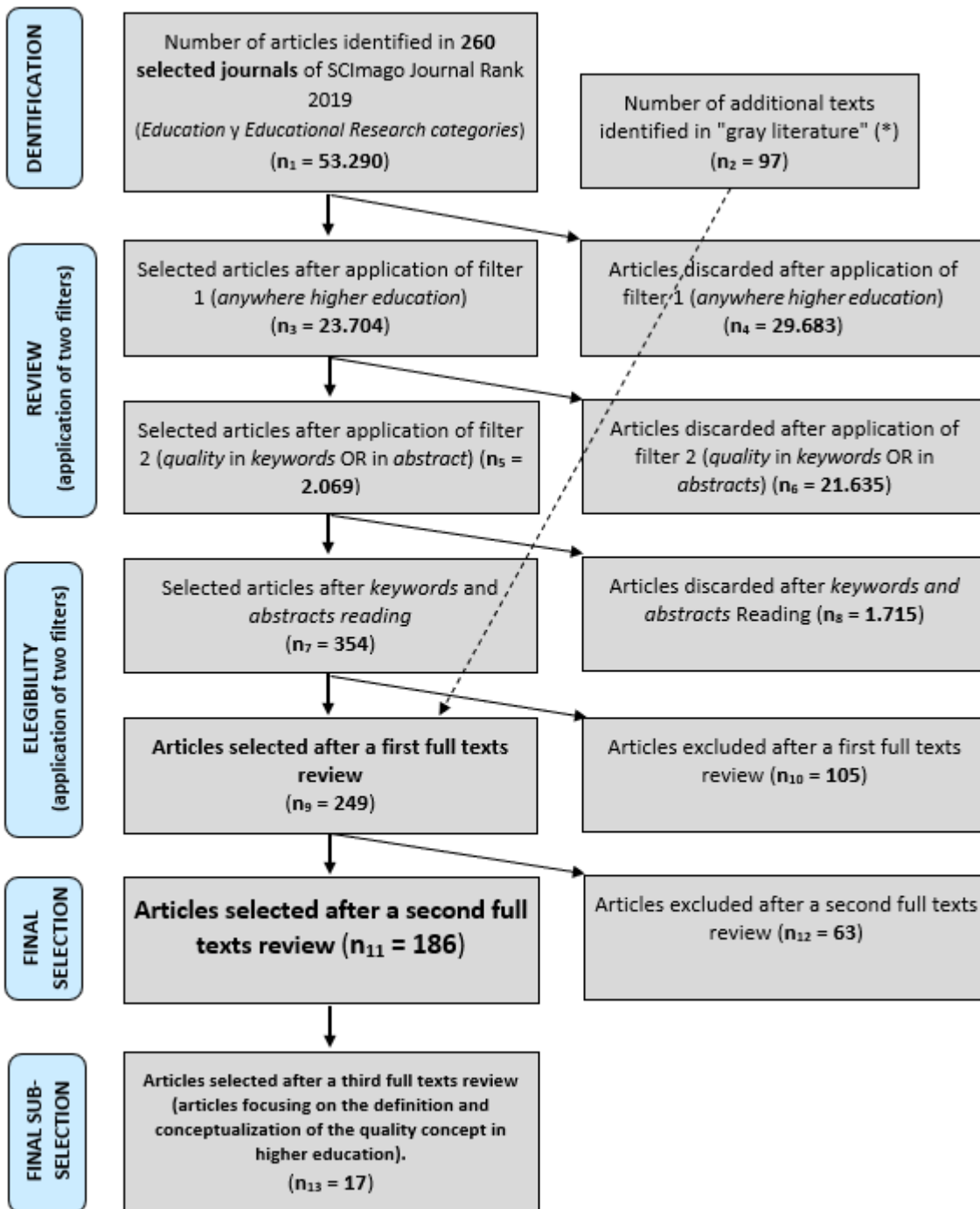
FIGURE 1
FLOWCHART OF THE ARTICLES REVIEW ON THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION



Source: Developed by the author based on Moher et al. (2009).

Figure 2 shows the results obtained in each of the phases of the review.

FIGURE 2
REVIEW OF ARTICLES REGARDING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION



NOTE (*): After reading the 97 "gray literature" texts originally identified, 17 were discarded due to their low relevance. The 80 texts selected in this category correspond to 5 books (6%), 69 book chapters (86%) and 6 articles published in journals (8%).

Source: Developed by the author based on Moher et al. (2009).

The first search phase - designated as “Identification” in the diagram - was restricted to the abstracts and keywords of the articles in each of the 260 journals selected, according to three successive search instances. The first two phases corresponded to the stage designated as “Review” in the diagram: application of the “higher education” filter anywhere in the text, followed by application of the “quality” filter in abstracts and keywords. In order to refine and increase the sensitivity of the search, in both instances, in addition to the filters mentioned above, the following Boolean connectors were used: (Quality) AND (Education OR Educational OR Academic) AND (Education OR Teaching).

The second phase of the review - designated as “Eligibility” in the diagram - consisted of the selection of articles based on the reading of abstracts and keywords of the 2,069 articles selected in the previous phase. A new selection was then made based on the reading of the full texts of the 354 articles selected in the previous instance, as well as the 97 texts corresponding to “gray literature” (books, book chapters and articles published in journals not indexed in SJR-2019). In this phase, narrative reviews, scales, scale validation and studies in distance education systems were excluded. Thus, 249 articles were selected from the initial universe of 53,290, and 80 “gray literature” texts (5 books, 69 book chapters and 6 articles).

In the “Final Selection” phase, these 249 pre-selected articles were subjected to a second very detailed reading that resulted in the selection of 186 articles out of the total of 53,290 published in the 260 journals included in the search scope. Based on this second reading, an analysis of themes was conducted by open deductive coding, which resulted in the elaboration of brief summaries of the most relevant results regarding the conception of quality in higher education and its components valued as substantive. This analysis also made it possible to identify the main standards considered in the evaluation of quality in higher education. The results of this phase were recorded and organized in a spreadsheet that includes: journal name, article title, author(s), date of publication, keywords, country in which the study was applied, type of study (empirical or non-empirical), methodological strategy (quantitative, qualitative, mixed), dimensions or predominant standards in the *quality* conception, and the size and characteristics of the analysis unit and/or the constructed sample (teachers, students, officials, managers, experts, others).

Finally, it was of particular interest to select, from the 186 articles, those with an analytical focus on the *quality concept of higher education*, whose content was very useful in the preparation of this text, especially at the time of analyzing and weighing the results obtained in the review carried out. From the third reading carried out for this purpose - designated in the diagram as “Final sub-selection” - 17 articles were selected, some of which have already been mentioned in the introduction to this text.

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN RESULTS OBTAINED FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review generated five major sets of results:

- (1) the existence of a work that continues to be, almost thirty years after its publication, the most influential in the academic production of the conception of quality of higher education;
- (2) the finding that, notwithstanding their notorious diversity, the great majority of definitions and conceptions of this notion can be classified into two clearly differentiated groups according to their theoretical-conceptual foundations, which display an appreciable affinity with the positions taken by two experts whose works have been very influential in the last fifteen years, at least in the Latin American sphere;
- (3) the identification of the most commonly used components or standards for the evaluation of quality in higher education: teacher training and professional performance, rigorous, demanding, comprehensive and planned curriculum, administrative management and organization, student academic performance, characteristics of the relationship between actors, degree of achievement of motivating environments for study, building structure and available material resources, research activities, extension activities and links with local actors, governance regime, symbolic dimensions, financial support;

- (4) the existence, found in most of the articles considered, of a correlation between the type of conception of the quality of higher education assumed and the empirical strategy adopted for its determination (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, mixed);
- (5) identification, in the case of empirical studies, of the predominant analysis units (i.e., teachers, students, graduates, managers, experts)

For space reasons, we will briefly present here only the results corresponding to the first two sets.

The Influence of Lee Harvey and Diana Green on the Conception of Quality in Higher Education

Eight years later, the stinging question asked in the title of an essay that is still widely alluded to today – “*What the hell is quality?*” (Ball, 1985) - obtained, in the article “*Defining Quality*” (Harvey and Green, 1993), an answer that was quickly and widely accepted by the international academic community. This acceptance may have been due to the fact that, far from offering a concrete and conclusive answer -nothing of the “*Quality is...*” type-, it offered a solid framework for the elucidation of the concept in the field of higher education.

In “*Defining Quality*” its authors highlight that the relative nature of the *quality* concept when applied to higher education does not mean that we are dealing with different perspectives on the same concept, but rather with different perspectives on different concepts but under the same designation: *quality*. They also established five ways of understanding quality in higher education, which represent, as Prisacariu and Shah (2016) state, the main perspectives usually assumed by the different actors involved in the field: quality as excellence, quality as consistency or perfection (“zero errors”), quality as adjustment to the proposed objectives (“fitness for purpose”), quality as economic efficiency in terms of the correlation between costs and results (“value for money”), and quality as transformation.

The authors of most of the articles reviewed in the review that allude to these five perspectives (i.e., Cardoso et al., 2018; Cheng, 2017; Scharager, 2018; Tomás and Esteve, 2001; Wicks and Roethlein, 2009; Woodhouse, 1996) agree that the most widely used definition corresponds to the “fitness for purpose” perspective and, to a somewhat lesser extent, to the “value for money” perspective. As stated by Cheng (2017), a common feature of the “fitness for purpose” and “value for money” perspectives is their emphasis on institutional performance and its evaluation by agencies or external agents. The “value for money” perspective, structured around the notion of accountability, quality control devices in pursuit of quantifiable results and the consideration of the student as a customer or consumer (George, 2007; Houston, 2010; Scharager, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017), is closely linked to the neoliberal ideology dominant in much of today’s Western world (Acevedo, 2021; Giroux, 2015; Paradeise and Thoenig, 2013; Saunders, 2010, 2011; Saunders and Blanco, 2017).

Undoubtedly “*Defining Quality*” (Harvey and Green, 1993) is the most influential and most frequently cited article with a focus on quality in higher education (Marshall, 2016; Scharager, 2018). In the literature review carried out, it was mentioned 133 times in 17% of the articles selected after the first reading of the full texts (in 42 articles out of the 249 selected at that stage); in other words, each of these articles refers to this work, on average, slightly more than three times. The works of both authors separately are also very influential. With the exception of “*Defining Quality*”, in this universe of 249 articles there are a total of 128 references to works authored by Harvey or Green or where one of them is listed as co-author. As shown in Table 1, these references correspond to 33 articles (13% of the total number of articles considered). Thus, the total sum of the two types of references is 261, that is, slightly more than one reference, on average, in each of the 249 articles selected in that phase. These figures are significantly higher than those corresponding to any other article and/or authors with publications on the subject in question in journals indexed in SJR-2019.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF REFERENCES IN THE 249 SELECTED ARTICLES: (1) TO THE ARTICLE BY HARVEY AND GREEN (1993); (2) TO ARTICLES BY HARVEY AND GREEN AS AUTHORS OR AS CO-AUTHORS (EXCEPT HARVEY AND GREEN, 1993)

Q	authors	references (1)	references (2)
1	Akalu (2016)	4	4
1	Alzafari (2018)	1	1
1	Alzafari & Kratzer (2019)	1	1
1	Alzafari & Ursin (2019)	1	2
1	Avci (2017)	14	13
1	Cardoso, Rosa, & Stensaker (2016)	4	9
1	Cardoso, Rosa, Videira, & Amaral (2018)	7	7
1	Cheng (2017)	1	2
1	Das, Mukherjee, & Dutta Roy (2016)	1	-
1	Dicker, García, Kelly, & Mulrooney (2019)	2	2
1	Eliophotou Menon (2016)	8	6
1	Gerritsen-van Leeuwenkampa, Joosten-ten Brinke, & Kesterd (2019)	2	-
1	Giraleas (2019)	1	-
1	Goff (2017)	8	4
1	Hildesheim & Sonntag (2019)	3	3
1	Marshall (2016)	5	1
1	McCowan (2017)	3	-
1	Mukwambo (2019)	1	1
1	Prisacariu & Shah (2016)	3	5
1	Rahnuma (2020)	1	7
1	Sadler (2017)	2	-
1	Sarrico & Alves (2016)	1	5
1	Scharager (2018)	8	2
1	Steinhardt, Schneijderberg, Götze, Baumann, & Krücken (2017)	2	-
1	Tezcan-Unal, Winston, & Qualter (2018)	1	-
1	Vesce, Cisi, Gentile, & Stura (2020)	-	2
1	Kaynardağ (2019)	-	1
2	Bertolin (2016)	1	-
2	Brennan (2018)	1	-
2	Giannakis & Bullivant (2015)	2	2
2	Hauptman (2018)	2	2
2	Khalaf (2020)	7	1
2	Leiber, Stensaker, & Harvey (2018)	1	4
2	Seyfried & Pohlenz (2018)	1	-
2	Walls, Carr, Kelder, & Ennever (2018)	1	-
2	Zheng, Cai, & Ma (2017)	12	10
3	Barreto & Kalnin (2018)	6	18
3	Barsoum (2017)	1	2
3	Koçe, Jansone-Ratinika, & Koka (2017)	1	2
3	Mendoza & Ortegon (2019)	1	1
3	Monyatsi & Ngwako (2018)	2	1

3	Nabaho, Aguti, & Oonyu (2019)	6	1
3	Ortíz & Rúa (2017)	-	1
4	Aravena & Meza (2017)	1	-
4	Njie & Asimiran (2016)	2	5

(1): references in 42 articles (25 Q1, 9 Q2, 6 Q3, 2 Q4)
(2): references in 33 articles (20 Q1, 5 Q2, 7 Q3, 1 Q4)

SUBTOTALS:	133	128
TOTAL:	261 references	

Source: developed by the author.

The influence of this work is even greater in the content of the 17 articles that were selected for being focused on the concept of *quality in higher education*: it is mentioned in 14 of these 17 articles (82%), and the total number of references is 70, i.e., an average of 5 references per article. As shown in Table 2, the figures are similar in the case of references to works authored by Harvey or Green separately or where one of them is listed as co-author: 72 references, appearing in 15 of the 17 articles selected (88%). In this case, the total sum of both types of references is 142, or slightly more than 8 references, on average, in each of those 17 articles. These are clearly much higher figures than those corresponding to any other article and/or authors who have published studies on this subject in SJR-2019 journals.

TABLE 2
NUMBER OF REFERENCES IN THE 17 SELECTED ARTICLES THAT FOCUS ON THE CONCEPTION OF THE NOTION OF *QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION*: (1) TO THE ARTICLE BY HARVEY AND GREEN (1993); (2) TO ARTICLES BY HARVEY AND GREEN AS AUTHORS OR CO-AUTHORS (EXCEPT HARVEY AND GREEN, 1993)

Q	authors	references (1)	references (2)
1	Akalu (2016)	4	4
1	Avci (2017)	14	13
1	Cardoso, Rosa, & Stensaker (2016)	4	9
1	Cardoso, Rosa, Videira, & Amaral (2018)	7	7
1	Cheng (2017)	1	2
1	Dicker, Garcia, Kelly, & Mulrooney (2019)	2	2
1	Goff (2017)	8	4
1	Marshall (2016)	5	1
1	Mukwambo (2019)	1	1
1	Prisacariu & Shah (2016)	3	5
1	Scharager (2018)	8	2
1	Vesce, Cisi, Gentile, & Stura (2020)	-	2
3	Alvarado, Morales, & Aguayo (2016)	-	-
3	Barreto & Kalnin (2018)	6	18
3	Mendoza & Ortegon (2019)	1	1
3	Nabaho, Aguti, & Oonyu (2019)	6	1
3	Ortíz & Rúa (2017)	-	-

(1): references in 14 articles (11 Q1, 3 Q3)
(2): references in 15 articles (12 Q1, 3 Q3)

SUBTOTALS:	70	72
TOTAL:	142 references	

Source: developed by the author.

Two Polar Conceptions: Quality *En Soi* and Quality *Pour Soi* ²

As already discussed, there is a wide range of discourses that employ and define the *quality* concept, but not all of them are convergent or refer to the same thing (Harvey and Green, 1993; Toranzos, 1996; Weenink, Aarts and Jacobs, 2018). Half a century ago Kripke showed that naming and describing are not synonymous, since “when describing, predicative elements of the named object are enunciated, but [...] names have no sense of their own” (Cárdenas-Marín, 2016, pp. 116-117). This refers to what in the middle of the last century, in a posthumous book, Wittgenstein (2017) called “family similarities”: even if one pretends that there are essential characteristics common to things bearing the same designation, what they have in common is, strictly speaking, a set of overlapping similarities.

Assuming these considerations, a careful reading of the 186 articles selected in the penultimate phase of the literature review allowed us to infer that the vast majority of them can be classified into two large groups: (i) those that develop a conception - which may well be qualified as “quality *en soi*” - of the notion *quality in higher education* theoretically or empirically supported and valid for practically any institutional context; (ii) those that, in view of the strongly subjective nature of this notion, discard the relevance of the search for a single definition, within the framework of a type of conception that we qualify here as “quality *pour soi*”.

On the other hand, in a literature review of articles written in Spanish focused on the quality of education (Acevedo, 2008), it was determined that two of them, in addition to having been very influential in the academic production immediately after their publication, were representative of polar positions on this topic. These are the articles “*The quality of education: axes for its definition and evaluation*”, by the Argentine sociologist Inés Aguerrondo (1993), and “*The construction of quality educational programs*”, by the Madrid-based Pedro Municio (2005). Although it is unlikely that many of the authors of the articles that emerged from the review reported here have read either of these two articles -among other reasons because 80% of the journals reviewed are English-speaking-, in any case, in the first of the two groups mentioned above (which includes works that tacitly assume an “*en soi*” conception of quality in higher education) it is possible to recognize Aguerrondo’s article (1993) as an antecedent, while Municio’s (2005) is a clear antecedent of the second group, whose works are characterized by a “*pour soi*” quality conception.

Aguerrondo (1993) bases her argument on the consideration of quality as a complex and multidimensional concept applicable to any aspect of the field of education -learning, teachers, infrastructure, processes- and which governs decision-making in this field. Since it is a concept that is socially and historically determined, at each time and place its definition arises fundamentally from the demands that the social system makes on education. This perspective appears to be reaffirmed in works of diverse provenance (i.e., Filippakou, 2011; Lemaitre, 2010; Tedesco, 1987), as well as in many of the articles that were selected at the end of the literature review conducted (i.e., Nabaho, Aguti, and Oonyu, 2019; Prisacariu and Shah, 2016; Scharager, 2018) and in others published before the period considered in the review (i.e., Kleijnen et al., 2013; Rosa, Sarrico, and Amaral, 2012; Thune, 1996). Prisacariu and Shah (2016), for example, emphasize that the *concept of quality of higher education* far exceeds the eventual satisfaction of stakeholders and, in any case, has important policy implications. They state that, as a construct, this concept is never neutral and its meaning is always contextual. Indeed, underlying every definition of the quality of higher education is a tacit idea about higher education, its nature, purposes and fundamental processes. This is most evident in those works that define quality in higher education as “fitness for purpose”, the most widely used of the five perspectives proposed by Harvey and Green (1993); it is a pragmatic perspective that is generally applied to the control of educational processes and systems, insofar as the purposes are usually associated with the political aspirations of national governments in terms of stimulating the work of organizations in a highly competitive market (Cheng, 2017; Prisacariu and Shah, 2016) and, often underhandedly, favoring the disciplining of the population in line with the prevailing development model.

The theoretical position of Municio (2005) does not oppose in all the terms to the one outlined above, but it does present substantive differences. His axial approach is that “there is no “thing” called quality, [...] “but what is quality will be defined by the receiver of the object or service” (p. 488). In other words, he considers that quality is not, *sensu stricto*, a quality or characteristic inherent to a product or service, but

rather a value (or quality or characteristic) that the recipient attributes to it and that will depend on the degree to which the product or service contributes to satisfying his/her needs, interests, demands or expectations. This approach is also widely accepted in the academic production that emerged from the literature review conducted, both explicitly (i.e., Cardoso, Rosa, and Stensaker, 2016; Cardoso et al., 2018; Dicker, Garcia, Kelly, and Mulrooney, 2019; Mendoza and Ortegón, 2019, among others) and implicitly (i.e., Mukwambo, 2019). Mendoza and Ortegón (2019), for example, estimate that in the field of higher education *quality* is a subjective concept, susceptible to multiple definitions and valuations, which is evidenced by the fact that the aspects considered as key to quality differ notoriously among students and teachers. In much of the scholarly outputs of the past three decades (i.e., Cheng, 2011, 2012; Cheng and Tam, 1997; Green, 1994; Harvey and Green, 1993; Kalayci, Watty, and Hayirsever, 2012; Lomas, 2002, 2007; Newton, 2002; Sarrico et al., 2010; Schindler et al., 2015; Watty, 2005, 2006), including many of those selected in the review presented here (i.e., Avci, 2017; Dicker et al., 2019; Prisacariu and Shah, 2016; Scharager, 2018), it is emphasized that there are as many definitions of *quality in higher education* as there are categories of actors directly involved, whether they are from the educational institution in question (students, teachers, managers, non-teaching staff) or external to it (funding or sponsoring agencies, graduates, employers). Furthermore, some of these works (i.e., Avci, 2017; Dicker et al., 2019) state, in agreement with Municio (2005), that the adoption of certain definitions of *quality*, in addition to not always being coincident within each of these categories, depends on the prevailing circumstances at each time and place.

Although Aguerrondo (1993) and Municio (2005), as well as the vast majority of the articles selected in the review carried out, agree that quality is a socially determined concept and therefore susceptible to multiple definitions, for Aguerrondo (1993), as already mentioned, these arise fundamentally from what the social system demands from education -social determination is projected from the social system to education, one of its subsystems-, while for Municio (2005) they arise from the user -social determination emanates from the recipient of the educational product or service-. In the first case, the concept of *quality* -its conceptual construction, its definition and characterization- is conceived from the *political* in a traditional sense and, in the specific case of Aguerrondo, with a notorious neo-Marxist influence; in the second, it is conceived from *politics*, according to a more *modernized* version, in tune with what today seems to be considered, at least in this part of the world, as “politically correct”.

Each of these two ways of conceptualizing quality leads to the adoption of distinctive analysis units. In the former, these are usually institutional agents: government offices regulating educational subsystems (especially through their expression in official documents), their technical advisors (in many cases supra-national experts), management teams (at both institutional and organizational levels) and, more infrequently, funding or sponsoring agencies. Many of the selected articles in the conducted review share this position (i.e., Cheng, 2017; Nabaho, Aguti, and Oonyu, 2019; Prisacariu and Shah, 2016). In the second case, the studies focus on analysis units made up of various groups of actors directly or indirectly involved in the organizational dynamics of an educational center: students, teachers, graduates, potential employers (of graduates or advanced students), administrative staff. The review conducted also identified numerous studies aligned with this approach (i.e., Avci, 2017; Cardoso, Rosa, and Stensaker, 2016; Cardoso et al., 2018; Dicker et al., 2019; Mendoza and Ortegón, 2019; Mukwambo, 2019; Scharager, 2018).

On these bases, those who, like Municio (2005), align themselves around a conception of quality “*pour soi*”, focus on the analysis of quality throughout the process followed by an educational program, with emphasis on its results and effects, while those who, like Aguerrondo (1993), lean towards a conception of quality “*en soi*”, assume a perspective that privileges systemic studies focused on educational policies and on the ideological and pedagogical choices made by planners and decision-makers. This view is shared by authors from different geographical and disciplinary backgrounds (i.e., Lemaitre, 2010; Nabaho, Aguti, and Oonyu (2019); Prisacariu and Shah (2016); Weenink, Aarts, and Jacobs, 2018). Aguerrondo (1993) suggests that there is quality where there is consistency between the general political project in force and the educational project implemented or, more specifically, “between [its] fundamental axes (ideological, political, pedagogical, etc.) and the organization (or the phenomenal appearance) of the educational apparatus” (p. 5). According to this perspective, it is the political and ideological definitions that set the

standards for the evaluation of quality, whether of an educational system, a school organization or a pedagogical proposal.

This statement, in its implied connotations and in all that can be inferred from them, is the main point of divergence with the perspective of Muncio (2005), for whom the character, validity or consistency of the ideological and political (or even technical) definitions that have participated in the development of the educational product or service, or the qualities of efficacy or efficiency attributed to them, are of little importance. From this approach, the achievement of quality does not depend on the degree to which the educational product or service fulfills the objectives established by its creators -its effectiveness- nor does it lie in the extent to which the production process has optimized the available resources -its efficiency-, but rather in the degree to which the product or service contributes to satisfying the needs of its recipients (or users, consumers or clients, as the case may be). If it is up to the latter ones who are responsible for determining whether a product or service has quality, then its evaluation should not be made in terms of efficacy or efficiency, but in terms of “effectiveness, value and satisfaction” (Muncio, 2005, p. 493). Quality exists, then, if the educational product or service meets the objectives established by its creators - in line with the “fitness for purpose” perspective referred to by Harvey and Green (1993) and, according to what emerged from the review carried out, adopted by the vast majority of the main scholars on the subject-, but as long as these objectives are oriented towards satisfying the needs, interests, demands or expectations of its recipients (or users, consumers or clients).

Thus, in contradiction to the paradigm that defines quality in terms of the presence of attributes inherent to the educational product or service -its internal quality, according to the expression proposed by him- (definition aligned with the perspectives of “quality as excellence” and “quality as consistency or as perfection” referred to by Harvey and Green, 1993), Muncio (2005) claims a definition centered on the evaluation of its consumers -its external quality-, established on the basis of the distance perceived by them between their initial expectations and the degree of satisfaction achieved with the product or service received. According to this approach, external quality is the most relevant quality of any educational product or service. In short, even if the educational product or service is excellent in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, this does not guarantee its quality in the fullest sense, which will only be achieved when the effects it produces on its users are considered satisfactory or valuable by them. In a certain way, this approach is aligned with the one put forward by de Certeau (2000) in another disciplinary and thematic field: “a model is not judged by its evidence, but by the effects it produces in interpretation” (p. 150).

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION, AN ALTERNATIVE POSITION: QUALITY *POUR QUI* ³

In short, who is responsible for defining, determining or evaluating the quality of a system, program, product or service in higher education? Aguerrondo (1993) would respond to decision-makers advised by experts; Muncio (2005) would reply to the users or consumers. Let us consider, for the moment, that in terms of pertinence, feasibility, consistency or convenience, Muncio’s (2005) answer is acceptable: “what is quality will be defined by the receiver of the object or service” (p. 488). However, how can a consumer define the quality of the educational product or service he/she is consuming? How might all consumers of a product or service category determine its quality? Is this established (or inferred) by the simple fact of acquiring and consuming it? Are consumers in a position - situational, intellectual and corporate, among others - to determine consensual parameters for defining and/or evaluating the quality of an educational product or service? Even more relevant: if so, is it really appropriate for planners and decision-makers to adjust to such definitions and determinations? Would such an adjustment be relevant and valid? Would it be technically consistent and politically suitable?

The first two questions in the preceding paragraph, which are intentionally rhetorical in nature, refer to instrumental objections. The answers to the remaining questions, which involve objections related to practical sense - understood with the meaning assigned by Bourdieu (1990) in his book entitled, precisely, *Le sens pratique* - and are biased towards technical and political relevance, are, or should be, emphatically negative. In most of the world today, the fundamental guidelines of higher education are a matter of state. The creation and implementation of educational products or services cannot be considered apart from public

policies in education, much less delegating the definition of their quality to their consumers or, even less, taking what they qualify as quality as the main input of any educational plan, program, service or product. Educational resources, a crucial field in any social system, should not be equated to any other resource that participates in the market logic.

However, according to what Muncio (2014) establishes, the fundamental principle of quality, unanimously accepted by quality experts and entities that establish quality standards and/or certifications, is customer orientation. In his opinion, every institution should focus its management on the customer, and every product or service should be targeted at satisfying the customer's needs. On the contrary, we insist, this should not be strictly so in the field of education. In this field, the needs must be established by the social system as a whole - strictly speaking, by the citizens (among whom are included, evidently, the actors of education) - which, according to the constitutional provisions that govern our social life, delegates such establishment to the competent organs of the State.

It should not be assumed from the foregoing that education, in striving for the highest quality of its components, should not take into consideration the demand of the social sectors involved, nor pay due attention to the degree of satisfaction of the users of educational products or services. But it should not stop there. In any case, it could be acknowledged that any educational product or service must be targeted at satisfying needs, but only if they are not exclusively the needs felt, perceived or expressed by users, but also those that educational policymakers - as socially, politically and technically legitimized - deem appropriate to satisfy. This is the only meaning that can be attributed to the customer orientation advocated by Muncio (2005).

In this connection, our position is closer to that expressed by Aguerrondo (1993): “an efficient educational system is one that provides the best possible education to the greatest number of people. It is therefore constituted at an instrumental level: it depends on [...] how it is defined, in the political-technical instance, what is the ‘best education’ “ (p. 3). It is clear, consequently, that the definition of the quality of education – “the best education”- corresponds to “the political-technical instance”, that is, to the action sphere of the agents to whom the citizenry attributes the obligation, the power and the competence to define educational policies and make decisions. In any case, the citizens involved or directly or indirectly affected by the educational policies thus defined have their own spaces and instances -and if not, they should conquer them- for the eventual rejection or questioning of those policies. As is the case with so many other issues that emerge from (or become part of) social life in republican states with formal democracy and a semi-representative constitution, a good part of the conflicts are settled according to the mobilization and pressure capacity of organized social groups, whether they are, in the case of the educational field, teachers, students or their families.

A clarification should be made, exclusively for the Uruguayan case (and, with some differences, also for the Argentine case). Uruguay's public university education is governed by the fundamental principles of institutional autonomy and co-governance by students, professors and university graduates, as established by the Organic Law of the University, in force since 1958. In this case, in answer to the question posed at the beginning of this section - who should define, determine or evaluate the quality of the education system? the answer is unique and unequivocal: the decision-makers, who are also its users or consumers. The leading actors of the Uruguayan public university system -students, teachers and graduates- are also the main agents of change, in accordance with a representation system that is very consensually agreed upon and widely legitimized and accepted.

In any case, the adoption of an unequivocal and specific definition of the concept of *quality in higher education* is necessary as part of the starting point for the design of comprehensive educational plans and programs, both at the institutional and organizational levels, as well as for any system designed for the evaluation of existing plans and programs. But it is not the only definition needed. To it must be added the answers to two questions formulated by Blanco and Berger (2014) and reinforced by Marshall (2016): who defines the criteria to be included in that definition? Who benefits from the different definitions of quality?

In line with this type of approach, the manifestly pragmatic interest underlying this text is expressed in a predominantly political perspective that departs from both “*en soi*” and “*pour soi*” conceptions. On the one hand, because the essentialist conceptions, which our epistemological positioning discards, contribute

nothing in political terms, of transformative action or praxis. On the other hand, because merely subjectivist conceptions inhibit the possibilities of planning, programming or transformative projection. It is therefore necessary to replace the “*en soi*” and “*pour soi*” conceptions with a “*pour qui*” conception of the quality of higher education: quality for whom.

LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIAL CONTINUITY LINES

Although the performed literature review was developed with the utmost rigor and completeness (a starting universe of 53,290 articles published in the period 2016-2020 in a total of 1,272 journals, to which 80 “gray literature” texts were added), two limitations can be pointed out.

A first limitation lies in the fact that the review of articles was restricted exclusively to those published in journals indexed in the 2019 *Scimago Journal Rank* (although this is a highly recognized indexing base in the international scientific context).

Another limitation, of a rather partial nature, is that the period considered in the review (2016-2020) does not allow us to know and evaluate directly the theoretical and semantic drift of the notion of *quality in higher education* since its installation in the “hidden agenda” of the international scientific community - around the 80s of the last century - to the present.

The most direct continuity lines of the literature review, which would complete the comprehensive state of the art on the issue addressed, correspond to the analysis and discussion of the results that were excluded from the current text, already stated at the beginning of the third section: the components or standards most used for the evaluation of the quality of higher education and the correlation between the conception type of the quality of higher education and the empirical strategy adopted for its determination, including the predominant analysis units.

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ENDNOTES

1. This article contains some modifications regarding the one published in January 2022, in Spanish, in the journal *Sophia*, Colección de Filosofía de la Educación (“Philosophy of Education Collection”), 32, pp. 119-150 (Acevedo, Gago, da Silva y Bastos, 2022; <https://doi.org/10.17163/soph.n32.2022.03>).
2. Here the expressions “*en soi*” and “*pour soi*”, taken from the French language, are kept in their original spelling, since they do not admit a specific translation that at the same time preserves their gnoseological connotations. On the basis of a reference to distinctions proper to post-Socratic Greek philosophy and Kantian philosophy, the expression “quality *en soi*” refers to positions of an objectivist nature, those that consider that “things” have an essence (the *noúmeno*, the thing-in-itself), whose existence is independent of our capacity to account for it and, therefore, of any form of sensible intuition or representation. The expression “quality *pour soi*”, on the other hand, refers to subjectivist positions, among them those of a phenomenological nature that deny that “things” have an essence and that postulate, crudely put, that the world is the phenomenal world: the visible world, the world sensibly intuited, perceived, represented (Acevedo, 2008). Conceived in this way, “quality *en soi*” and “quality *pour soi*” are polar, opposing notions. Their existence in pure form is highly unlikely, but they are useful to differentiate the epistemological positions that, as far as higher education is concerned, present clear affinities with one or the other of these notions.
3. The literal translation of the expression “*pour qui*”, taken from the French language, is either “for whom” in both singular or plural. In the context of the discursive development of this text, the use of the expression “*pour qui*”, untranslated and applied to the concept of quality, answers the intention of encouraging the reader to contrast it with the expressions “quality *en soi*” and “quality *pour soi*”.

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