

Key concepts for quality in online higher education

Conceptos claves para la calidad de la educación superior online



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to conceptualize the quality of online higher education (OHE) through the perspectives of diverse stakeholders. To this end, we asked students (n=3,152), teachers (n=727) and informants (n=50) from 18 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Chile with online degree programmes to indicate the concepts they associate with quality OHE. Employing a qualitative methodology that combines deductive and inductive methods and lexicometrics, we analysed the data collected through questionnaires and interviews. The findings of this study show how a traditional vision of educational quality coexists in OHE through concepts linked to the 'graduate profile', 'standardization and 'accreditation', with emerging perspectives that reinforce the particularities of online education, reflected in concepts such as work-life balance, pedagogical design, equity, the value of technology, institutional support, individual qualities or relevance to the labour market. It highlights that 'flexibility' and 'learning' are the concepts most frequently mentioned by students and teachers respectively. This article introduces novel categories to conceptualize the quality of OHE by incorporating elements of adult education and virtuality as part of its meanings. Approaching educational quality contextually from a focus on equity is one of the challenges of a continuously growing modality with enormous potential in the framework of a global digital society.

Keywords: online higher education; distance learning; adult education; quality of education; flexibility

RESUMEN

Este estudio tiene por objetivo conceptualizar la calidad de educación superior online (ESOL) desde el punto de vista de diferentes agentes partícipes de la modalidad. Para ello, pedimos a estudiantes (n=3.152), docentes (n=727) e informantes (n=50) de 18 instituciones de educación superior (IES) en Chile con carreras de grado en modalidad online, que señalaran los conceptos que asocian a una ESOL de calidad. A través de una metodología cualitativa que combina métodos deductivos e inductivos y lexicometría, analizamos los datos recogidos a través de cuestionarios y entrevistas. Los hallazgos de este estudio muestran como en la ESOL coexiste una visión tradicional sobre la calidad educativa a través de conceptos vinculados al "perfil de egreso", la "estandarización" y la "acreditación", con perspectivas emergentes que refuerzan las particularidades de la educación online, reflejadas en conceptos como la conciliación, el diseño pedagógico, la equidad, el valor de la tecnología, el acompañamiento institucional, las cualidades individuales o la pertinencia con el mundo laboral. Destaca que la "flexibilidad" y el "aprendizaje" son los conceptos más mencionados por estudiantes y docentes respectivamente. Este artículo aporta nuevas categorías para conceptualizar la calidad de la ESOL, al incorporar elementos propios de la formación de personas adultas y de la virtualidad como parte de sus significados. Plantear la calidad educativa de forma contextual y desde un enfoque de equidad es parte de los desafíos de una modalidad en continuo crecimiento y con enorme potencial en el marco de la sociedad digital global.

Palabras clave: educación superior online; enseñanza a distancia; educación de adultos; calidad de la educación; flexibilidad

INTRODUCTION

Online education is effective in achieving learning outcomes (Martin et al., 2022). Furthermore, it is preferred by a segment of students who have opted for higher education (HE) later in life or have faced obstacles like economic constraints, challenges in achieving work-life balance, geographical limitations, and/or social barriers (Chung et al., 2017; Tieben, 2020). Gender and other variables such as type of work activity have been identified as key elements in understanding student and teacher experiences and preferences (Qazi et al., 2022). Flexibility and access without time or geographical restrictions have been identified as the most common reasons for preferring this mode of study. These attributes find particular resonance amongst individuals engaged in unpaid domestic responsibilities, caregiving responsibilities, or constrained by mobility issues (Lee et al., 2019; Veletsianos et al., 2021).

In recent times, online higher education (OHE) has experienced notable growth and worldwide expansion within educational systems. This phenomenon is attributed to rapid digital transformation and an escalating demand for lifelong learning (Guo et al., 2020). Nonetheless, persistent biases and resistance persist against its potential and multifaceted benefits (O'Dea & Stern, 2022). This is evidenced by the continuous exploration of novel frameworks to assess the quality of online education, aimed at substantiating its validity and optimal progress (Ortiz-López et al., 2021).

This study duly recognizes the significance and robust nature of the diverse models crafted for evaluating the quality of online education (La Rotta et al., 2020; Luna Serrano et al., 2018; Marciniak & Gairín Sallán, 2017; Ortiz-López et al., 2021; Waheed et al., 2016). However, the pursuit of standardized definitions, in our perspective, has somewhat distanced itself from the viewpoints and experiences of individuals engaged in online education, who are valuable contributors to the construction of meaning. Hence, this article aspires to conceptualize the quality of OHE through the lenses of students, educators, and various stakeholders from HEIs that have adopted online modalities. This will be achieved by uncovering both shared and distinct concepts employed by these actors in defining the quality parameters of online education.

THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY

Harvey & Green's (1993) proposition continues to hold prominence as a touchstone in discussions about educational quality (Cheng, 2017; Jungblut et al., 2015; Scharager Goldenberg, 2018). Their contributions have engendered pivotal categories that underpin the comprehension of quality: (i) quality as adjustment for purpose has a functional character that focuses on delivering what is proposed or offered; (ii) quality as value for money, bridging the realms of education and finance; this category assesses the economic efficiency of educational provision. It also delves into external accountability and audit processes aligned with business and service sector norms; (iii) quality as excellence, encompassing exclusive and challenging conditions; this dimension perpetuates an elitist perspective of education, emphasizing stringent achievements; (iv) quality as exceptional, defined by distinctive attributes within programs or study conditions compared to the wider system. It encompasses meeting pre-established minimum standards observed by external agents; (v) quality as transformation, focusing on the capacity of education to positively change the way of perceiving the world and the improvement or acquisition of new competencies; (vi) quality as student-centred refers to empowerment processes aimed at enabling

students to participate in their own educational process; (vii) quality as added value refers to the perception of improvement resulting from an educational experience as a qualitative measure; (viii) quality as selectivity; this notion embodies an elitist stance, revolving around predetermined characteristics that determine access and persistence within specific institutional profiles; and finally (ix) quality as a virtue of professional practice is centred on the motivation and commitment of those involved in educational processes. This aspect is closely linked to workplace well-being.

ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

Online higher education (OHE) boasts an extensive research lineage. As outlined by Martin et al. (2020), the predominant research domains encompass three focal areas: students, courses and faculty, and institutions. However, certain pivotal themes, notably quality and access, equity, inclusion, and ethical concerns, have been underexplored. On approaches to measuring OHE quality, Esfijani (2018), highlights those studies that have mainly focused on resources, inputs and processes of online education. Nonetheless, a comprehensive, holistic perspective that addresses approaches to the conceptualization and measurement of quality in their entirety is lacking. These endeavours often hinge solely on the student's standpoint, thereby sidelining perspectives of faculty, institutional stakeholders, and corporate entities. Similarly, in the work of Marciniak & Gairín Sallán (2017), the absence of universally applicable criteria for diverse models of online education quality assessment is evident. Divergent definitions, interpretations, and dimension prioritization emerge within each model scrutinized. Two overarching streams are discernible: one advocating the adaptation of conventional (face-to-face) quality criteria, albeit with varied emphasis, and the other espousing the creation of fresh categories to align with digital contexts' distinct demands (Ortiz-López et al., 2021). This study aligns with the latter trajectory.

In an era steeped in digitalization, the intricacies of cyberspace and virtual learning environments warrant analysis which considers their individualities and disparities (Bendixen & Jacobsen, 2017). These domains thrive autonomously, free from reliance on the analog world for the creation of meaning. Concurrently, these virtual environments are intrinsically enmeshed within specific social and cultural frameworks, thereby shattering any claims of neutrality. Social inequalities and imaginations are redefined and perpetuated within these digital landscapes (Atenas et al., 2022; Wajcman, 2010). Against this backdrop, a critical exploration into the quality of such virtual spaces necessitates the translation of classical paradigms into models that resonate with these distinctive circumstances. Furthermore, a need arises to create new categories in order to accommodate these complex realities.

Approaching the quality of OHE from a fixed perspective mandates careful consideration of student and faculty specificities. The student demographic has been labelled 'non-traditional' due to such characteristics as being over 25 years old, balancing external responsibilities with studies, and financial independence. Notably, this group is characterized by a higher likelihood of attrition despite often demonstrating comparable or superior academic performance to their "traditional" counterparts. They also exhibit heightened resilience in the face of the barriers to access and persistence inherent to higher education. Yet, their engagement with the student community might be less intense, and their participation may lean more towards non-formal study programs, continuing education, and distance learning (Tieben, 2020). Additionally, Sánchez-Gelabert et al. (2020) indicated that older

students perceive their educational journey distinctively, focusing on learning and theoretical knowledge acquisition. Unlike the homogenized student profile, OHE instructors embrace a diverse range of profiles. The institutional context of teaching support plays a fundamental role in shaping their practices and perspectives (Xavier & Meneses, 2021). This study particularly concentrates on educators who frame their teaching ethos around the concept of mentoring (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2021), combines disciplinary, pedagogical, didactic, and technical competencies in order to facilitate the study process through feedback, guidance, motivation, and monitoring (Richardson et al., 2022).

The educational landscape has shifted significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting the reassessment of online education across diverse conditions and educational systems (Green et al., 2020). This transformational period has recalibrated the perception of online education from a peripheral modality to one deemed relevant in various educational contexts. This transformation has diminished social biases long-associated with online education, dissolved labour market barriers for online graduates, established prominent online education institutions, and elevated the demand for online or hybrid programs. Notably, traditional institutions' interest in infusing their programs with flexibility has surged. Flexibility, therefore, emerges as a pivotal concept that is reshaping higher education post-confinement (Lockee & Clark-Stallkamp, 2022; Müller et al., 2023).

The concept of flexibility within OHE must align with scalability, a fundamental criterion for optimal resource utilization and broad-reaching impact (Ragusa & Crampton, 2017). Scalability mandates that online programs be ubiquitously accessible (Virtanen et al., 2018), enabling learners to engage with activities and resources at their convenience, regardless of location or time. This principle requires institutions to meticulously design courses for longevity and broad accessibility. To ensure this across an array of subjects and degree programmes, standardization of training provision is paramount. A critical examination of flexibility also necessitates an inquiry into its association with individual autonomy and neoliberal ideologies, which concurrently yield economic dividends in digitally commodified educational landscapes (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2021; Saura et al., 2023).

In neoliberal educational realms marked by deregulation and surging demand for access to higher education, quality often conveys adherence to external accreditation and accountability processes (Gerón-Piñón et al., 2021). This study seeks to broaden this perspective by infusing an equity-focused approach to quality in online education, as highlighted by Harrison & Mathuews (2022). This approach seeks to ensure that standardized and mass-designed modalities remain cognizant of the human and diversity-centred dimensions. Quality in this context is envisioned as a multidimensional and subjective construct that is created dialogically and collaboratively, rather than merely achieved (Stracke, 2019; Williamson, 2019). Thus, a thorough understanding of how individuals navigate learning processes and educational contexts mediated by technology is imperative.

METHODOLOGY

This research constitutes a segment of an ongoing doctoral thesis, grounded in a qualitative methodology that enables a profound understanding of the connotations attributed to a given concept by involved individuals (Flick, 2022). Employing semi-structured interviews and questionnaires as information generation techniques, this

study delves into both institutional sources as well as students and teachers. The research was conducted during the Chilean academic year of 2021. Both instruments (interview guideline and survey) asked: "In your opinion, what concepts do you associate with a quality online higher education (OHE)?" In the case of the questionnaire, this question was open-ended, and three concepts were asked to be written down. The analysis encompasses deductive and inductive methods for interviews and the lexicometric method for the open-ended questionnaire question. A triangulation of outcomes from these methodologies yielded emerging categories conducive to conceptualizing OHE quality from the viewpoint of the engaged stakeholders. The specificities of each technique used are presented below.

Interview

At the beginning of 2021, 27 HEIs implementing online degree programmes in Chile before 2020 were invited to participate. Eighteen institutions agreed to participate: three Technical Training Centres (CFT, by its acronym in Spanish), seven Professional Institutes (IP, by its acronym in Spanish) and eight Universities. Private funding was characteristic of all institutions except one university. The selection of institutional informants followed a sampling approach based on certain defined criteria (Izcarra, 2007). These encompassed profiles involving academic authority (i), quality assurance (ii), innovation and institutional development (iii), and pedagogical design for online education (iv).

Between March and May 2021, a total of 50 interviews were conducted, adhering to the theoretical saturation criterion (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This criterion delineated the participation of informants, considering that further interviews would not significantly enhance the insights towards the intended objective (Guest et al., 2006; Nelson, 2017).

The institutional informant sample comprised individuals across universities (n=21), IP (n=24), and CFT (n=5). Gender-wise, the sample was equally divided, with 25 identifying as female and 25 as male. The distribution concerning institutional profiles included: profile i (n=10), profile ii (n=15), profile iii (n=13), and profile iv (n=12). In terms of professions, the majority hailed from the Engineering sector (n=22), followed by Education (n=19) and Social Sciences (n=5). Most participants held a master's degree (n=37 with a smaller number possessing a professional degree (n=3) and doctorate (n=3). The engagement with online education revealed that 44 individuals had undertaken online studies, while 28 had received training in OHE-related subjects.

Prior to commencement, the instrument underwent validation, including a methodological review by two academics from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) (December 2021) and content validation via eight pilot interviews. Ethical considerations were duly followed, approved by the ethics committee of UAB (ref. CEEAH 5586). The interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform, lasting between 30 and 70 minutes. These sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and securely stored within the university's cloud infrastructure. Ensuring anonymity, informed consent was obtained prior to interview initiation.

Thorough analysis with NVIVO software employing open coding resulted in the formulation of 54 substantive codes capturing prevalent themes in the interviews (Rodríguez, 2019). Subsequently, these codes were structured into categories, adding analytical and theoretical weight to the coding process (Gibbs, 2018). The categories

were defined through a combination of deductive and inductive logic (Neale, 2016), anchored in both the theoretical constructs outlined in the interview guidelines and the emergent topics deemed pertinent (Table 1). Finally, the most representative units of analysis were selected to elucidate the meanings ascribed by participants to each category.

Table 1
Codes for analysing perceptions of quality in OHE

Codes	Source
Quality as adjustment for purpose	Harvey & Green, 1993
Quality as value for money	
Quality as excellence	Harvey & Green, 1993; Jungblut et al., 2015
Quality as exceptional	
Quality as transformation	
Quality as student-centred	Jungblut et al., 2015
Quality as an added value	
Quality as selectivity	
Quality as virtue of professional practice	Cheng, 2017
Quality as accreditation	emerging from the interviews
Quality as standardization	
Quality as equity	
Quality as relevance to the labour market	
Quality as value of technological aspects	
Quality as pedagogical design	
Quality as work-life balance	

Source: own elaboration.

Questionnaires

In September 2021, all participating HEIs from the qualitative phase were invited to continue to the questionnaire stage, with 14 institutions (comprising three CFTs, six IPs, and five Universities) agreeing to participate. Sample selection within each institution adhered to defined criteria: inclusion of students and teaching staff who had either studied or taught subjects within any online degree program during 2021. Students and teachers were self-selected to answer the questionnaire.

In the student questionnaire, out of a total of 4,119 responses, 3,937 granted consent, with 644 solely engaging in the characterization section and 3,152 respondents answering from the first quality item (cases deemed valid). The sample distribution reflects 48.9% identifying as female, 50.6% as male and 0.1% (n=5) as non-binary, in addition to 0.2% who opted for "I prefer not to answer". The average age stands at 37.1 years (SD=8.7). Among them, 78.3% have a permanent contract (of which 61.2% identify as male), while only 6% engage solely in unpaid household work (of this group, 95.6% identify as female). The sample collected in this study amounts to 4.0% (n=3,152) of the total population of students who took an online degree course in Chile during the year 2021 (SIES, 2022).

Moving on to the teacher questionnaire, a total of 861 responses were received, with 841 consenting to participate. Out of these, 114 individuals responded solely to characterization items, and 727 participants answered starting from the first quality item (considered valid cases). The sample breakdown comprises 51.9% identifying as female and 48.1% as male, with no mention of non-binary genders. The mean age

stands at 45.1 years (SD=10.6), with 79.6% holding temporary contracts with their respective institutions. In this aspect, gender parity prevails, and 46.4% possess less than three years of online teaching experience. However, the Chilean Higher Education Information System (SIES) lacks differentiation based on teaching mode for academic staff in institutions, thus precluding a determination of the sample's representativeness among teaching staff.

Two ad-hoc online questionnaires were created for students and teaching staff. A panel of nine expert judges conducted the validation process, assessing the instrument for its univocity, relevance and pertinence to the research objectives (October 2021). Ethical approval for these procedures was secured from the ethics commission of UAB (ref. CEEAH 6161). Questionnaires were disseminated using web links via the SurveyMonkey platform. The distribution strategy varied among institutions, utilizing survey platforms or mass mailings, along with subsequent reminders. Each respondent independently self-administered the questionnaire, without the presence of the research team (Cohen et al., 2009). Data collection spanned from November 2021 to January 2022.

In order to analyse the acquired responses, the lexicometric or textual statistics method (Lebart et al., 2000) was employed, following the approach proposed by Concha-Díaz & Léniz Maturana (2022) to quantitatively assess information derived from open-ended questionnaire sections. The analysis proceeded in two distinct phases. The initial phase involved revising original concepts (9,448 from students and 2,180 from teachers) standardizing their wording, rectifying typographical errors, and subsequently eliminating redundant concepts (e.g., "quality", "education", "distance learning", "good" as well as concepts necessitating additional context in order to understand their relevance to quality (e.g., "surprised," "educational inspector," "level"), and opinion-based comments (e.g., "first time studying online," "I have had a good experience at the institute"). Moreover, concepts and comments that negatively assessed or recounted poor OHE experiences were excluded. This led to a total of 8,161 student concepts and 1,712 teacher concepts. The second phase comprised a qualitative evaluation of the final concepts, aiming to construct categories for their systematic grouping.

RESULTS

The results are presented in three parts: (i) what quality means to institutional informants; (ii) what quality means to students and teachers; and (iii) emerging categories derived from the convergence of the aforementioned insights. In the case of institutional informants, the three most recurring codes, along with pertinent representative quotes for each code, are detailed. Similarly, for students and teachers, we commence by detailing the frequency of concepts according to variables and subsequently delve into the occurrence of emerging categories developed in order to categorize the concepts.

Perspective of institutional informants

Table 2 showcases the codes employed to analyse the interview data, ordered by recurrence of quotations. The analysed data pertains to responses to the query: "In your opinion, what concepts do you associate with quality online higher education (OHE)?"

Table 2
Codes for analysing perceptions of OHE quality and recurrence

Codes	Recurrence
Quality as adjustment for purpose	93
Quality as accreditation*	64
Quality as standardization*	54
Quality as equity*	49
Quality as virtue of professional practice	44
Quality as relevance to the labour market*	43
Quality as student-centred	40
Quality as excellence	40
Quality as an added value	30
Quality as value of technological aspects*	29
Quality as transformation	29
Quality as selectivity	22
Quality as pedagogical design*	21
Quality as work-life balance*	17
Quality as value for money	16

*Emerging codes.

Source: by author.

As can be seen, reference to the classical perspective of "quality as adjustment for purpose" emerges as the most frequently cited, succeeded by "quality as accreditation" and "standardization". The prominence of "quality as equity" draws attention, particularly concerning the access that facilitates ubiquitous learning within the modality. Similarly, the minimal reference to "quality as selectivity" and "value for money" can be interpreted as a valorization of the modality's own potential for access to a non-traditional student profile. Below, we elucidate how institutional informants conceptualize the three most recurrent codes.

Quality as adjustment for purpose

Among the interviewees, adequacy to objectives within the context of OHE is perceived as the realization of the graduate profile, aligned with the regulatory framework of the country. This profile is converted into a commitment by institutions and a demand from students. Fulfilling the graduate profile is regarded as a means to meet student expectations, which, in line with the numerous references to business language, forms a part of the "client" contract. Additionally, it's noteworthy that respondents from profiles (i) and (ii) (academic and quality) place the graduate profile as the foundation encapsulating the objectives of HEIs undergoing institutional assessment.

En la medida, que si hay una carrera online que aspira a desarrollar una serie de competencias o habilidades (...) en la medida que eso se cumpla y que efectivamente esos egresados sean valorados en sus competencias, uno efectivamente puede decir: ¿sabes qué? Aquí hay una buena alternativa, hay una formación de calidad [To the extent that there is an online degree programme that aspires to develop a series of competencies or skills (...) to the extent that this is fulfilled and that these graduates are effectively valued in terms of their

competencies, one can effectively say: "you know what? There is a good alternative here, there is quality training" (University, profile i, male).

On another note, the significance of adhering to the graduate profile is seen as the pivotal factor ensuring uniformity across different modalities and the same study programme. The link between ensuring consistent objectives and OHE quality is nearly causal, according to the interviewees.

Cuando uno habla de la calidad en la virtualidad o en carreras que son online, lo que uno busca, es que el cumplimiento del perfil de egreso del estudiante virtual sea el mismo que del presencial [When one talks about quality in the virtual world or in degree programmes that are online, what one looks for is that the fulfilment of the graduate profile of the online student is the same as that of the face-to-face student] (IP, profile ii, female).

Quality as accreditation

Respondents view accreditation as a "burden." Despite public policy advocating for continuous or comprehensive quality, this notion remains distant in practice. Interviews suggest that the value of OHE must be substantiated, more so than with other modalities. The scarcity of Chilean references to online education and the absence of research in this domain further exacerbate the situation. As a result, HEIs devote a substantial portion of their resources and efforts towards external and international certification processes (ISO, Quality Matters, CALED, etc.) that pave the way for institutional accreditation.

Es sancionatorio, porque públicamente te sanciona, porque hay una puesta en escena pública publicitaria, porque la institucionalidad también asigna recursos a esa acreditación; porque las universidades hoy día tienen que desarrollarse casi en forma exponencial con recursos limitados en productividad [It is sanctioning, because you are publicly sanctioned, because there is a public promotional staging, because institutionality also allocates resources to this accreditation, because universities today have to develop almost exponentially with limited resources in terms of productivity] (University, profile ii, male).

The concept of quality as accreditation aligns with the interviewees' understanding that OHE is an integral part of a quality system underscored by conformity to standards, coupled with punitive mechanisms that significantly influence the institutions' future. The significance of self-assessment and internal quality assurance processes becomes clear in this context. These processes, grounded in adherence to internal regulations, serve to reveal compliance or non-compliance with the graduate profile across various locations, courses, and modalities within an institution. The internal administration of quality assurance systems for OHE mirrors the reality of several HEIs in the country, where a commercial and instrumental perspective and language regarding educational quality prevails.

Los mecanismos de aseguramiento de la calidad institucional es el cumplimiento de la normativa interna (...) Y es la verificación de que ese proceso que está definido y queremos que se cumpla en cualquier sede, en cualquier modalidad, en

cualquier jornada; se haga en forma como transversal, no de una forma distinta porque implica directamente o impacta directamente en el perfil de egreso del estudiante [The mechanism of institutional quality assurance is compliance with internal regulations (...) And it is the verification that this process which is defined and which we want to be fulfilled in any location, in any modality, on any day, is done in a transversal way, not in a different way because it directly involves or has a direct impact on the student's graduate profile] (University, profile ii, male).

Quality as standardization

References to quality as standardization are delineated by interviewees as the harmonization of institutional resources to enable the fulfilment of the graduate profile across the institution's diverse formats. Standardizing the educational offer is perceived by those interviewed as a strategic means to provide students with a clear navigational path for their autonomous learning endeavours.

Porque de pronto entra en contradicción que tengamos tanta actividad estandarizada en una plataforma, cuando justamente nuestro modelo indica que la flexibilidad es una virtud de nuestro modelo (...) el estudiante para un mismo aprendizaje, él debería optar, ¿cuál es la mejor forma que tiene él de aprender? Acá en Chile los modelos incluyen todo, pero el estudiante necesariamente tiene que pasar por todos los pasos [Because suddenly it seems contradictory that we have so much standardized activity on a platform, when our model specifically indicates that flexibility is a virtue of our model (...) the student should be able to choose what is the best way for them to learn? Here in Chile, the models include everything, but the student has to go through all the steps] (University, profile iv, female).

In this regard, it is interesting to observe that standardization serves as the mechanism facilitating the “management of flexibility”. In pursuit of this objective, certain protocols and guidelines steer the efforts across various profiles and domains influencing OHE, ranging from the pedagogical sphere to the administrative realm

Nosotros hemos entendido que, para administrar la flexibilidad de manera responsable, uno tiene que tener cosas muy bien estructuradas, porque pretender lanzarse a la flexibilidad sin ordenar los procesos, es arriesgado [We have understood that, in order to manage flexibility in a responsible way, one has to have things very well structured, because trying to launch into flexibility without organizing the processes is risky] (IP, profile i, female).

However, the deeper connotations of standardization in terms of OHE quality are intertwined with the objective of ensuring educational equivalence with the traditional face-to-face mode. Interviewees underscore a strong correlation between the uniformity of materials and resources and quality assurance, with the recurring notion of being on par with the quality of face-to-face education. Another facet of standardization's association with quality pertains to the consortia that some institutions are part of. The majority of these consortia consist of private foreign conglomerates that enforce a consistent editorial approach across HEIs, while also

allowing for contextual adaptations that align with the nuances and distinct characteristics of the country.

Students and teachers

Table 3 presents the most frequently cited concepts offered by students and teachers in response to the question: "From your experience as an online student/teacher, write down 3 concepts that you associate with quality online higher education". It's important to note that the question doesn't request a ranking of the importance of each concept, thus, we compiled a unified list for the analysis. Each concept encompasses its plurals and related grammatical forms (e.g., flexibility: flexibilization, flexible).

Table 3

Most used terms by type of institution, profile and gender

Type of institution	Profile	Gender	Frequency of the most mentioned concepts
Technical Training Centres (CFT)	Students	Female	Teachers (43), Lessons (24), Platform (24), Flexibility (23), Responsibility (21), Study material (20)
		Male	Flexibility (17), Teachers (14), Study material (11), Communication (10), Platform (9)
	Teachers	Female	Feedback (11), Flexibility, Learning (10), Development (8), Engagement (7)
		Male	Teachers (9), Feedback (7), Constant (6), Communication (4), Learning (3)
Professional Institutes (IP)	Students	Female	Teachers (258), Study (194), Flexibility (192), Study material (111), Support (110)
		Male	Teachers (237), Study (207), Flexibility (205), Study material (109), Support (89)
	Teachers	Female	Flexibility (31), Teachers (25), Learning (23), Feedback (14), Autonomy (13)
		Male	Flexibility (29), Learning (24), Student (22), Teachers (20), Engagement (12)
Universities	Students	Female	Teachers (83), Flexibility (35), Lessons (30), Platform (27), Study material (26)
		Male	Teachers (81), Flexibility (70), Platform (37), Study material (31), Lessons (28)
	Teachers	Female	Learning (26), Student (23), Flexibility (19), Innovation (15), Communication (11)
		Male	Learning (30), Student (25), Participation (19), Teachers (18), Flexibility (18)

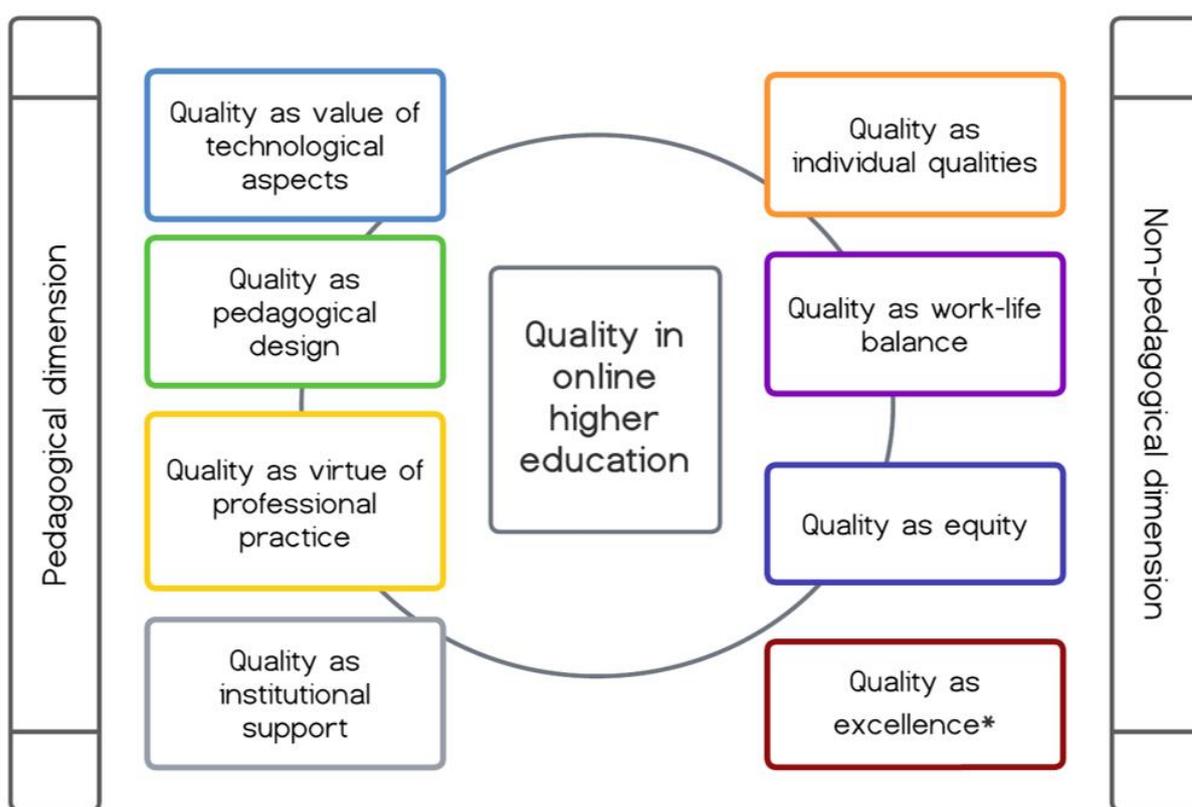
Source: by author.

Notably, the sole concept that resonates strongly across responses from students across all HEIs and genders is "flexibility." Meanwhile, the other concepts also exhibit similarities and traverse a spectrum of individual attributes and allusions to instructional approaches, methodologies, and platforms. This suggests the presence of a shared experience among online students, which holds interesting implications warranting further exploration. On the contrary, although flexibility holds significance for the teaching staff as well, their references lean more towards teaching practices and student dedication. Strikingly, there is a conspicuous absence of references to platforms or technological aspects of the modality. The underemphasis on

technological facets might be construed within the context of the relatively brief experience of the sample to online teaching, thus possibly influenced by a predominantly face-to-face instructional outlook.

Drawing from the qualitative assessment of the aforementioned concepts, eight distinct categories emerged, serving as thematic clusters to encompass shared perspectives. Among these, four categories pertain to the pedagogical dimension (Quality as value of technological aspects, Quality as pedagogical design, Quality as virtue of professional practice, Quality as institutional support) while the remaining four pertain to the non-pedagogical dimension (Quality as individual qualities, Quality as work-life balance, Quality as equity, Quality as excellence) (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Categories of OHE quality of learners and teachers



*This category is the only one that is not emergent, as it corresponds to the conceptualization of Harvey and Green (1993).
Source: by author.

Table 4 illustrates each category alongside the concepts with the highest frequency within each one, delineated across the two distinct profiles constituting the sample. This presentation effectively illuminates which concepts give meaning to the various categories. Noteworthy in this context are the concepts intertwined with connectivity, underpinning the category of “Quality as a value of technological aspects”. This discourse potentially alludes to a digital divide in internet accessibility, a dimension meriting thorough investigation through the lens of equity in educational provision. Additionally, a striking similarity emerges in the concepts employed by both students and teachers; within each category created, one or two of the four most prevalent

concepts invariably overlap. This convergence in conceptual usage across profiles unveils a shared apprehension of the quality-related challenges intrinsic to the modality, which could be attributed to a certain generational proximity inherent in the samples.

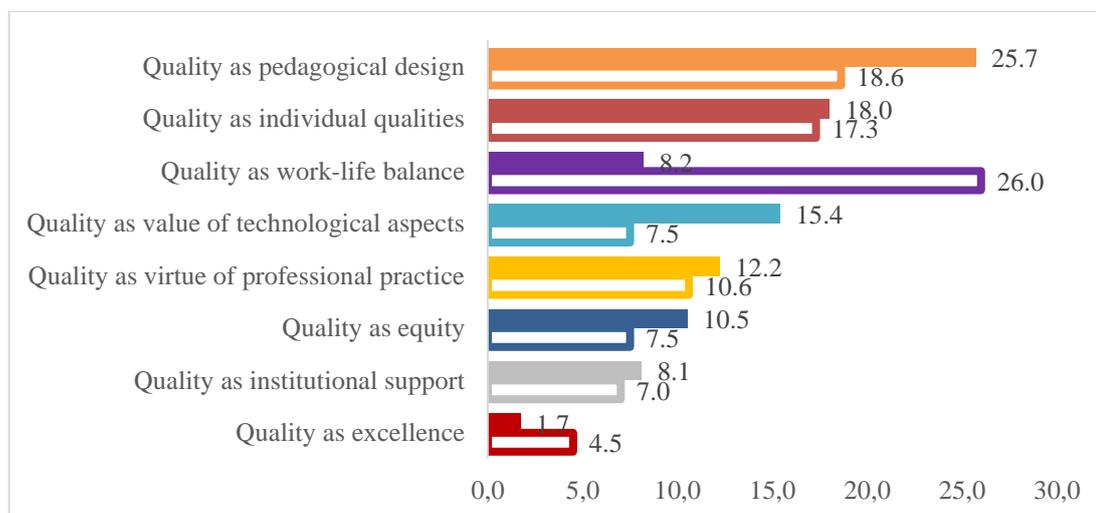
Table 4
Most frequently occurring concepts by category

Dimension	Categories	Concepts	
		Students	Teachers
Pedagogical	Quality as value of technological aspects	Connectivity, Internet, Good platform, Interactive technologies	Connection, Platforms, Technologies, Virtuality
	Quality as pedagogical design	Content, Study material, Practice, Innovation	Meaningful learning, Innovation, Active methodologies, Evaluations
	Quality as virtue of professional practice	Lessons, Teacher communication, Good teachers, Feedback	Feedback, Teacher training, Teacher guidance, Support, Guiding teachers, Teachers
	Quality as institutional support	Support, Guidance Follow-up, Clear information	Guidance, Effective communication, Empathy, Follow-up
Non-pedagogical	Quality as individual qualities	Autonomy, Self-management, Responsibility, Organization	Autonomy, Participation, Engagement, Responsibility
	Quality as work-life balance	Flexibility, Time, Freedom, Convenience	Flexibility, Convenience, Time, Availability
	Quality as equity	Accessibility, Affordability, Economy, Inclusion	Accessibility, Opportunity, Inclusive, Diversity
	Quality as excellence	Accreditation, Academic Excellence, Recognition, Prestige	Excellence, High Standard, Indicators, Demanding

Source: own elaboration.

The eight categories distinctly carry different weight with students and teachers. Figure 2 offers a visual representation of this distribution relative to profiles. Among students, most concepts congregate within the category of “Quality as work-life balance” (2,123), followed by “Quality as pedagogical design” (1,519). Notably, the category experiencing the least aggregation of concepts is “Quality as excellence” (364). Conversely, among teachers, the majority of concepts cluster within “Quality as pedagogical design” (440) and “Quality as individual qualities” (308), whereas “Quality as excellence” contains the lowest number of concepts (29).

Figure 2
*Percentage distribution according to categories of teachers and students**



* Teachers (filled bar) and students (bar with borders).

Source: by author.

In summary, the analysis of interviews and questionnaires has revealed novel categories that hold significance in conceptualizing the quality of OHE. Among students and teachers, seven distinct categories emerged, complementing the traditional perspective of "Quality as Excellence." Likewise, for institutional informants, seven categories were identified, with five aligning closely with those discerned among students and teachers, while two categories were specific to this particular sample. These categories are presented in Table 5, segmented by profile.

Table 5
Emerging categories of quality in OHE

Categories	Students and teachers (questionnaire)	Institutional informants (interview)
Quality as equity	X	X
Quality as value of technological aspects	X	X
Quality as work-life balance	X	X
Quality as pedagogical design	X	X
Quality as institutional support	X	
Quality as individual qualities	X	
Quality as accreditation		X
Quality as standardization		X
Quality as relevance with the labour market	X	X

Source: own elaboration.

The categories that emerged from the questionnaires can be explained by the distinct attributes of the non-traditional student cohort and the salient features of online teaching, as underscored by the teaching staff. These categories exhibit a more subjective essence and highlight the pivotal role that both profiles play in the realm of quality. In contrast, the categories stemming from the interviews emphasize contextual, institutional, and external facets linked to quality assurance, and to a lesser extent, the modality itself.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Online Higher Education (OHE) finds itself at a pivotal juncture, propelled by the confluence of circumstances prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, digital transformation, and evolving labour market requisites, creating an optimal environment for OHE's continuous expansion and consolidation (Guo et al., 2020). An exploration of its quality, encompassing diverse stakeholders and realms within OHE, stands as a crucial facet for transcending lingering biases (O'Dea & Stern, 2022).

Traditional viewpoints on educational quality in higher education carry the weight of accreditation and instrumental approach (Gerón-Piñón et al., 2021). In education systems where online education remains peripheral, prevailing discourse on educational quality often marginalizes its significance, allowing conventional assumptions of face-to-face education to prevail. Consequently, online education is often perceived as merely an adjunct that modifies contextual factors (platforms) and instructional resources (design), rather than embodying a distinct educational paradigm. Within such contexts, the construct of quality tends to adopt a monolithic hue, occasionally shaded by specific attributes relevant to OHE. Contrarily, this study posits that online education doesn't merely reshape "how" and "what," but fundamentally reshapes the very meanings and objectives of education itself (Ortiz-López et al., 2021).

This dichotomy in perspectives resonates in the responses from students and teachers as well as institutional informants. The concepts that each group associates with OHE quality reveal divergent perspectives. Among institutional informants, quality aligns more closely with accreditation, fitness for purpose, and standardization, while themes of work-life balance and pedagogical design hold more sway for students and teachers. Remarkably, concepts linked to institutional accreditation or vocational relevance (emanating from interviews) are scarce in the open-ended questionnaire responses. This disparity underscores the coexistence of traditional educational quality paradigms alongside emergent viewpoints that reinforce the distinctiveness of online education (Ortiz-López et al., 2021).

For institutional informants, their perceptions reinforce perspectives rooted in external standards and exceptional circumstances (Barroilhet et al., 2022; Harvey & Green, 1993), coupled with an interpretation of quality grounded more in quantitative criteria than qualitative dimensions (Gerón-Piñón et al., 2021). This might stem from a mercantile education system (Oyarce et al., 2020), where prevalent neoliberal subjectivity engenders business-centric language, conceiving quality as a quantifiable outcome rather than an integral process (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2021; Simbürger & Donoso, 2020). These notions permeate the curriculum structure of online education, allowing it to be scalable and gauged by observable metrics. Here, the quintessential "graduate profile" assumes the mantle of defining OHE quality as perceived by institutional informants. This recurring concept stands as a guiding mantra, aligning institutional endeavours and, if deemed achieved, attaining quality almost incidentally. Nonetheless, delving into how this declarative objective is internalized by different facets within the OHE ecosystem—especially how HEIs gauge the realization of graduate profiles as occupational competencies and skills—would be a pertinent avenue for exploration. It could likely be substantiated through graduation rates, obtained qualifications, or, ideally, through graduates' trajectories in the labour market, as these profiles often correlate with real-world competencies.

In the case of students and teachers, perceptions of educational quality broaden conventional viewpoints by integrating elements intrinsic to their online experiences. The significance of categories like quality as work-life balance, pedagogical design, and individual qualities exemplify this trend. In this context, the importance of content and methodologies mirrors the heightened significance that "non-traditional" students attribute to learning and theoretical knowledge in their online education (Sánchez-Gelabert et al., 2020; Tieben, 2020). For online learners, OHE quality is perceived through more subjective and intrinsic prisms. Notably, the sense of individual agency they invest in determining study quality (articulated through traits such as "autonomy," "responsibility," "organization," or "engagement") is striking. This might be construed as a contemporary rendition of the classical student-centred quality perspective (Harvey & Green, 1993) adapted to the challenges of virtual learning for adult learners. Moreover, it aligns with neoliberal subjectivities ingrained in the educational framework, encompassing individualism, efficiency, and meritocracy (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2021; Simbürger & Donoso, 2020; Veletsianos et al., 2021).

For teachers, the emphasis on "methodologies," "learning," and their instructional roles ("tutor," "teacher," "educators") reveals how this understudied cohort perceives OHE quality, placing themselves at the core of education and recognizing their pivotal role in the instructional process, as evidenced by concepts like "feedback" or "participation." However, it's prudent to investigate the actual influence teachers wield from an institutional standpoint—such as their participation in decision-making, training, and educational programs, or the working conditions conducive to their roles, thereby underscoring the merits of this professional practice (Cheng, 2017).

References to platforms that foster participation and flexible learning methodologies, interwoven with concepts denoting OHE quality, encourage contemplation on how such ideals coexist within models governed by scalability and standardization in the milieu of commercialized education and digital capitalism (Ragusa & Crampton, 2017; Saura, 2023). Flexibility is understood more abstractly and commercially from an institutional perspective rather than as a pedagogical element (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2020). Therefore, probing into the practical implementation of flexibility and organizational perspectives, and analysing the ways flexible institutional cultures and strategies are concretely promoted, becomes crucial. Ample references to flexibility are ubiquitous among students and faculty, who position it as a pivotal element in conceptualizing OHE quality, which could reflect the prominence of the concept in higher education today (Huang et al., 2020; Müller & Mildemberger, 2021; Lockee & Clark-Stallkamp, 2022; Müller et al., 2023; Veletsianos et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the results show that in OHE, flexibility is inherent to the modality, rather than a distinctive facet of its quality. For students, the ability to harmonize studies, employment, and family life is reinforced through concepts linked to quality as work-life balance. A gendered analysis could potentially uncover disparities in how flexibility and work-life balance are experienced among diverse student profiles (Chung et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2019; Tieben, 2020). However, despite flexibility's current prominence, the concepts tied to access, equity, inclusion, or ethical dimensions remain relatively unexplored in the quality literature (Martin et al., 2020). Integrating flexibility as an integral component of OHE quality prompts an expansion of quality models and the creation of indicators to comprehend and evaluate its scope.

The findings of this study offer us a means to conceptualize the quality of OHE through novel concepts that arise from the diverse viewpoints of the various stakeholders engaged in this modality of higher education. The interplay amongst key

concepts demonstrates the heterogeneous nature of the education system, as well as the distinctive attributes of each profile. However, above all, the outcomes underscore the imperative to establish shared conceptual frameworks that integrate the essence of OHE quality, reflecting its multifaceted nature from a myriad of perspectives. Integrating an equity standpoint into conceptions of educational quality has the potential to enrich the discourse amongst stakeholders of online higher education and engender a more introspective, contextually aware comprehension of OHE (Harrison & Mathuews, 2022; Stracke, 2019; Williamson, 2019). By shifting focus away from purely technical aspects or quantitative benchmarks, new inquiries could arise, probing the inherent conflicts intrinsic to educational markets shaped by digital technologies (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2021; Saura et al., 2023), while simultaneously illuminating disparities and gaps in various contexts, and accentuating the potential for increased democracy and equity. Certain contributions in this domain have employed a gendered perspective in order to challenge heteronormativity and prevailing narratives surrounding the quality of online education, thereby imbuing interactions on educational platforms with a political dimension (Sepúlveda-Parrini, 2023). Nevertheless, these emergent issues remain nascent and warrant further exploration.

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