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## Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa

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### The National Center of Evaluation for Higher Education (CENEVAL) and the External Evaluation of Mexican Education

#### El CENEVAL y la evaluación externa de la educación en México

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Center for Technical and Further Education (Cetys-University)

#### Abstract

The National Center for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CENEVAL) has developed and set in motion a series of examinations which permits the evaluation of students when they complete their Bachelor's level education. The General Examination for Bachelor's Degree Graduates (EGEL) explores the essential knowledge and abilities required to begin professional practice. The claims in favor of applying the EGEL exam stand on its usefulness as an external evaluation instrument which permits students and institutions to verify efficacy and achievement in accordance to national standards. The evaluation of graduates with the EGEL complements the universities' own certification of students. The

preceding allows the author to propose that in the immediate future, there be established standards in the educational institutions or laws in the country supporting the double evaluation of graduates: one internal, applied by their own higher education institution (HEI); and another external, conducted by joint bodies (government, professional bodies, specialized agencies, etc..).

*Key words:* Evaluation, higher education, quality of education

## **Resumen**

El Centro Nacional de Evaluación para la Educación Superior (CENEVAL) ha preparado y tiene en operación una serie de exámenes que permite evaluar a los estudiantes cuando concluyen sus estudios de licenciatura. Cada EGEL (Examen General para el Egreso de Licenciatura) explora los conocimientos esenciales y las habilidades básicas que se requieren para iniciar la práctica profesional.

El alegato a favor de los EGEL radica en su utilidad como instrumento de evaluación externa, lo cual permite a los estudiantes y a las instituciones que los forman constatar su eficacia y sus logros a la luz de estándares nacionales. La evaluación de los egresados con los EGEL permite complementar la certificación que realizan de sus propios estudiantes las universidades.

Lo anterior permite proponer que, en el futuro inmediato, se establezcan normas en las instituciones educativas o leyes en el país que propicien la doble evaluación de los estudiantes egresados: una interna, a cargo de la propia institución de educación superior (IES) y otra externa, realizada por instancias mixtas (gobierno, colegios de profesionales, organismos especializados, etcétera.).

*Palabras clave:* Evaluación, educación superior, calidad de la educación.

## **Preamble**

I must comment that I willingly accepted the invitation to participate in this forum for two reasons: one is that I have something to say, something I think is important and that may be of interest to you. The other reason is symbolic, because I have no desire to remain indifferent to the call for an revolution in Mexican education, especially when it is the entrepreneurs who called for that revolution. Certainly, the circumstance is novel and promises much success.

The text I am presenting today attempts to respond to the request of those who invited me to provide information and explain what the CENEVAL is and what it does—this, of course, in the context of a forum that will discuss proposals for transforming education in our country. In such a circumstances, my presentation will be mainly descriptive, but the nature of the National Evaluation Center for Higher Education and the functions performed lend themselves well to going beyond the reports and descriptions, and into the argument in favor of some proposals which I will make, and which could have a positive impact on our educational system. With these objectives in mind, and with the spirit willing to exchange points of view with you, I prepared this lecture.

### **Why was the CENEVAL created?**

To explain what the National Center for Higher Education Evaluation is and what it does, it is necessary to start with the reasons and circumstances that justified creating it and putting it to work. These reasons and circumstances can be summarized into one: the discontent among broad sectors of society concerning the quality of education. The CENEVAL is an operative body, an organization designed to put into practice, on a daily and ongoing basis, that which in the framework of the concepts, policies and guidelines of the education system has been expressed as priority: the qualitative improvement of the processes of evaluation and the purpose of intensifying them. The thing that should be stressed here is the intention to evaluate more rigorously and consistently what is done in the educational system, because we all know that evaluation is the daughter of dissatisfaction, is the daughter of goals not achieved, of delays, of unfulfilled promises, of unattainable longings and many other ways to identify discontent. Although it is a technical mistake, in practice, we remember evaluation when we are unhappy, when the results of something neither fulfill nor satisfy our expectations. Therefore, evaluations of progress are ambivalent practices and are interpreted from opposing positions: while some see them as strategies that contribute to improvement, others see them as a threat.

As we can see, the implementation of such principles and guidelines involves distributing specific responsibilities among organizations and bodies with specific purposes. In this truly complex situation operates the CENEVAL, whose functions and services must contribute to improving the quality of education in Mexico. It has been said that this is a context of dissatisfaction and discontent, but it also is a context of IES self-criticism, as well as sensitivity to criticism from the social and economic environment. Like many other things in our country, the CENEVAL was created more as a reaction, than as a precaution against concrete problems, and because of this, it was created with equally concrete expectations having urgent deadlines, and of course, with purposes which are the object of debate. All in all, the CENEVAL must provide evidence related to the learning achieved by students, which helps to assess the tasks of higher education institutions. The quality of an educational program is measured, among other things, based on the learning that students achieve. The evaluation of that learning is essential.

### **What is the CENEVAL, what does it do?**

To achieve its mission, the Center is dedicated mainly to developing examinations and tests of knowledge and skills. These instruments help to evaluate the effectiveness of programs and educational activities. Put in very plain terms, it investigates the extent to which students have learned what they should learn. The investigation which is carried out with CENEVAL exams is additional and complementary to those which each teacher applies in schools and colleges. The use of CENEVAL examinations is voluntary, and it is the educational institutions that

determine the impact and effects which the results and information provided by the CENEVAL will have.

CENEVAL exams are designed and prepared to be valid throughout the country; therefore, these tests are not designed according to the curriculum, the profile of graduation or the agenda of any particular educational institution, except in the case of the content of basic education, which is mandatory throughout the whole educational system. CENEVAL exams are not intended to explore fully and exhaustively all of an educational program's possible aims and objectives, but those that are considered basic, indispensable or essential in each program. Thus, for example, the test to evaluate those who finish a BS program in medicine is oriented toward the knowledge, information and skills that *every doctor* recently graduated from a university should have, regardless of the educational institution in which s/he has studied. From its external and independent perspective, the CENEVAL advocates establishing the "essential minimum" of knowledge and skills to be achieved in any university, high school or junior high school degree program.

Obviously, the "essential minimum" turns out to be, for some, a goal relatively easy to achieve, while for others, it is a challenge that requires them to redouble their efforts and make changes. The main purpose, ultimately, is to prevent the existence of programs offering less than the "essential minimum", and of course, it is not intended to induce a conformist attitude among those who have already achieved or exceeded those minimums. Those schools that would refuse to go beyond the essential minimum would be mistaken. As for the CENEVAL, it is constantly revising its standards and indicators.

As shown, the contribution being made by CENEVAL facilitates and makes possible studies, evaluations and comparisons which are not feasible to make with the exams and tests given by each teacher at each school. With the necessary adjustments and the required qualifications, there is an effort to establish the widespread use of what might be understood as *national standards*. Such standards may relate to different levels, from mere adequacy or satisfactory performance to the highest performance. In this sense, the CENEVAL gives affidavits and certificates depending on the results obtained by students on their examinations. These documents are unofficial, and in no way change the rights belonging to the educational institutions and authorities to issue certificates, diplomas and professional credentials. What the CENEVAL does aim to do is gain sufficient credibility for its results and substantiation of academic achievement to constitute reliable evidence of verification for persons who take the exams, for schools, and for those who contract the services of professionals. Evidence of this kind is always desirable, and in certain circumstances it is even necessary. The same thing occurs with systems of external accreditation (independent of official approval) of educational programs. These procedures, which are practiced in several countries, are especially appropriate in Mexico, whose system of education is highly heterogeneous in terms of the quality, resources and purposes of each school. The establishment of standards, indicators and evaluation systems for the educational system is a decision promoted and adopted by most of the country's

university rectors and directors, but there have been uneven advances in the process of implementation, since there is still much resistance to be overcome, and it is expected that the debate on external evaluation will continue. Certainly, the full integration of schools and universities of our educational system into the culture of evaluation and excellence will require great effort and will involve risks, but none will be as costly or transcendent as it would be to give up this purpose or to become indifferent to the quality of what we do and what is done to us. And we must be vigilant, as there are signs in our society that make us feel uncertain about the leading role our universities have had in the search for excellence. Hence the disagreement, hence the relevance achieved by evaluation in these times; hence, also, the controversy and questions surrounding the external evaluation of our educational system and, of course, the CENEVAL—perhaps today's most important external evaluatory organization.

Although it may seem unnecessary to mention it, the questions that certain groups have put to CENEVAL were inevitable, and were expected. The agency has put into practice what for decades had been treated only rhetorically; the exams are already there, and it is no longer possible to avoid taking a position on them, because there is a record of those who accept them, and also of those who avoid them. Even more important, there is a record of the results obtained. The panorama of the fame and prestige of the educational institutions has begun to change—and this includes public and private institutions. Under these conditions, objections to external evaluation were inevitable, and will be for a while, but it is worth waiting to see the benefits. Sooner rather than later, we will have more reliable components that will enable us to make better decisions, to judge and rate achievement based on evidence, and not on simple assumptions, beliefs or values induced by ideological propaganda or advertising. All in all, this type of reaction and resistance to the evaluation would not exist if those who recommended, agreed upon, and funded the implementation of peer committees, accreditation councils and the CENEVAL had been willing to settle for just talk and no action. The difference is that the external evaluation of Mexican education is now underway and palpable.

### **What needs to be done, and some proposals**

Clearly there are elements which keep the mood optimistic and confident when we think of the path we have taken; however, it is also essential to understand that we are just starting out on the road toward full implementation of the culture of excellence, and toward the adoption of practices inherent in external evaluation. Things being the way they are, I will devote the final part of my speech to the presentation and justification of some proposals which I hope will not detract or clash with the revolutionary and transforming spirit of this forum.

My proposals relate both to education itself and to the tasks related to evaluation, which is a function that acts iteratively with the whole educational process. In other words: we must transform what educators do, and we must adjust the criteria and

ways of evaluating these duties so as to confirm at a later date the results and effects of the transformations we are seeking today. The process is a continuing cycle, and what we see as innovative today will be the routine of tomorrow.

As for the transformation of the educational process, I assume that other participants in the forum will have clear and specific recommendations for dealing with it, so I will not invade other territories, or run the risk of being redundant. I also assume that from this forum will come most relevant and valuable contributions that will give a new dimension to the commitments of educators based on the new expectations that society—or at least the important sector of the entrepreneurs—has for its system of education. I understand that you have talked about, and will talk about new expectations and these new commitments, but I need to ask some questions to shore up or support my proposals: what is the use of establishing the most valuable intention if its achievement is not verified? What is the use of discussing what must be done, if afterward no one cares about seeing how far and how well it was done? And with still more irritation, I must ask: what good is it to have evaluated, confirmed and verified that some people were successful and others failed, if it does not lead to decisions and congruent actions?

These complaints are rooted in recent experience, and are not a mere exercise in a hypothetical scenario. Hence my desire to make some proposals, and I request that you incorporate them into the conclusions of this forum as well as in the decisions that each of you will make later on in your own companies.

### **First proposal:**

That the entrepreneurs who form the Employers Confederation of Mexico (COPARMEX) commit themselves to promoting and supporting the necessary actions for changing the criteria and procedure currently in place to provide and maintain the credentials for exercising professions. In this sense, among the multiple proposals that would emerge, I note the one differentiating between the granting of the academic degree or academic certification (responsibility borne by each school), and the authorization to practice an activity as a professional (responsibility of the Government Education Authority). The differentiation must be accomplished by establishing two different and complementary assessment processes, one characteristic of an educator and the other external, coming from professional colleges and bodies related to certification.

Also evident is the necessity of limiting the duration of the professional license, and introducing as a required practice, regular assessment of professionals as well as the establishment of norms and standards for renewing the credential permitting exercise of the profession.

### **Second proposal:**

That entrepreneurs in the COPARMEX—independent of the previous proposal and the result it might have—establish in their own areas and work fields, evaluation processes to identify the extent to which the professionals they hire have sufficient knowledge and skills. The crux of this proposal is to prove or verify with an additional evaluation procedure, what the educational institutions certify.

It is easy to notice that both proposals imply a strengthening of the external assessment strategies with respect to the work of educational institutions, to which they should send a clear message: inbreeding and complacency are no longer tolerable nor are they acceptable; educational institutions cannot be outside openness, transparency and comparability in assessing the results of their work and their decisions. These messages will have specific and particular meanings for educational authorities, for school and college directors, teachers, academic support workers, and above all they are intended as a guarantee for students and their families. They—the students and their families—would know that the school is not the only one who will evaluate the learning achieved and the training received. They must be responsible to monitor and demand that the school provide them with what they need to achieve external certification. In sum, and I blush to say it, the intention is for Mexican students to study and incorporate themselves into professional practice and extra-scholastic life with the same commitment and excellence that children and young people of other societies have lived as normal and habitual for many decades. It has to do with achieving obvious goals, and because of that, I am afraid these proposals may not seem particularly revolutionary. But I have another proposal that also has to do with the need for educational assessment strategies to fortify external approaches, and that might seem radical. However, there is really nothing innovative or revolutionary about it.

### **Third proposal:**

That the members of the COPARMEX promote and support the operation of a system of evaluation, accreditation and certification that must function when schools, universities, technical institutes or colleges are not in charge of education. If that happens, as many say it will, the disappearance of the schools and the processes of teaching and learning as we know them today (which goes beyond the magic and power of the *World Wide Web*, and its uses and abuses),—if that really happens, there will still be needed a way to measure, prove, compare and qualify what is learned, what people know how to do, and how to be and live. If there are predictions of revolutions in the contents and modes of education, there must also be predictions about the corresponding transformations in how to assess the effects and consequences.

As we approach these scenarios, I propose something more modest, nothing revolutionary, entirely feasible and something of which the actual doing would be of great benefit.

#### **Fourth and last proposal**

That entrepreneurs—whether public or private—whose business it is to educate not wait for the educational revolution Mexico to happen, in order to do well what they do. That they not wait for others take the risks and pay the price for initiating the changes. That they assume their own responsibilities, instead of looking at others' attempts to justify themselves. Regarding this, they might start to implant in the schools for which they are responsible, the external evaluation of their programs and their students, using the facilities already available, such as the CENEVAL, the Council for Standardization and Certification of Competency Standards (CONOCER), the interinstitutional committees, the accreditation councils, etc. This could be a good decision for all Mexicans, and could be a way to start a revolution.