

Institutional Performance Commitments: An Example of Intra-Institutional Accountability in Chile

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Currently, multiple accountability procedures take place in Chile. I discuss in this article one of those procedures that relates to the University of Chile, the top public research university in the country. The accountability procedure refers to performance commitments established between academic units and the university's central administration. The article develops the concept of "performance commitments" (*compromisos de desempeño*) at the institutional level (Bernasconi 2011; Fernandez 2008) by defining the concept and outlining how the commitments are influenced by the institutional sector and national tradition. In the second part, I discuss relevant organizational, political, and economic conditions that demand accountability at the performance commitment level. Lastly, I conclude with a brief discussion about the factors encouraging and discouraging the adoption of accountability measures by the University of Chile and how (institutional) performance commitments are likely to lead towards better-established accountability mechanisms in the near future.

Universities and Accountability

Higher Education institutions are increasingly becoming more accountable to different stakeholders (Altbach 2000; Enders and Musselin 2008; McConnell 1971). However, as Daniel Levy (1986) and T. R. McConnell (1971) argue, institutions are subject of multiple types accountability. To whom is a university accountable? Universities are accountable to their faculty, administrators and trustees, students, the government, and the public (Amaral 2008; Gumport et al. 1997; McConnell 1971). In order to describe the ac-

countability procedure, the next section refers to Enrique Fernandez's work (2008), who is one of the most systematic and comprehensive researchers on accountability at both the faculty and institutional levels. This article focuses only on the institutional level.

Academic Units and Central Administration: The University of Chile

Academic units as subjects of accountability are one type of performance commitment instruments. The particular case of the University of Chile is described here. The University of Chile is the oldest, largest, and most prestigious university of the country. It is a public university that consists of 18 colleges, schools, and institutes. The University is an example of how academic units (e.g., departments, schools, and *facultades*¹) are becoming accountable to the central administration. This accountability procedure is not extensively implemented, basically because it is still in progress. Nonetheless, it is still worthwhile to pay attention to the process because it marks a trend for accountability procedures of this type in Chile.

Intra-Institutional Accountability

Academic units are accountable to the central administration by means of reporting their activities, finances, and academic performance. This type of accountability could fit what Linda Johnsrud and Joanne Gisselquist (2002) have defined as internal/voluntary accountability. It is exerted at the intra-institutional level. Specifically, the University of Chile's department directors and deans (depending on the case) have to report to the central authorities about how resources are being used within their academic units. In addition, they have to prove that the methods

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that their academic units are using to allocate resources are effective and efficient. Even though the University of Chile's academic units are currently held accountable to the central administration, they have historically enjoyed a good deal of autonomy. However, as its accreditation report shows (Provost, personal communication), the autonomy enjoyed by these academic units is the bottleneck of the central administration when trying to align schools and *facultades* with the institutional goals. According to Andrés Bernasconi (2011), the University of Chile's decentralization would lead to operate it as a confederation of *facultades*.

Notably, the accountability policy intends to align the leverage of resources of academic units with the University goals. Due to the current increasing reception of public funds, the University of Chile has become equally accountable to the government and to some state agencies. Thus, the University has started efforts to press the academic units toward achieving certain indicators that later on will be used to justify the use of resources to the national government. The management of faculty is a good example to illustrate this intended policy.

Design and Implementation

According to the University of Chile 2006-2010 strategic plan (quoted in Bernasconi 2011, p. 12), "the university stated as one of its main goals, to congregate the best faculty nationally; working accordingly to international standards."² Regarding the issue of faculty management, the University of Chile has embarked in a reform that aims to freeze any new part-time hiring and to increase the sharing of full-time professors with doctoral degrees. Currently, part-time faculty accounts for two-thirds of the entire faculty population at University of Chile. Furthermore, among full-time faculty, only 42 percent hold a doctoral degree (Bernasconi 2011).

In addition, concerning accountability of academic units, the heads of academic units have to justify how they manage the faculty. In other words, there is a need for accountability on how faculty is hired and what is carried out to maintain a balance between part-time and full-time professors. Because the goal of the Univer-

sidad of Chile is to carry out premier research, according to international standards, the University is trying to minimize the amount of part-time faculty members and to increase the proportion of full-time faculty whose primary focus is research. Thus, academic units are being compelled to justify why, if so, they need to hire new or to renew the contracts of part-time faculty. In other words, academic units are not autonomous to decide on faculty hiring any longer.

The institutional performance commitment is voluntary and does not necessarily involve any economic incentives. However, as the academic units are becoming more accountable by multiple means and measured through a variety of indicators, there is little leeway to bypass central control and monitoring. At the time of writing this article, I found some sort of resistance to the policy, especially among *facultades* with more part-time faculty. However, it is interesting that department chairs are also being held accountable for the decision-making regarding part-time faculty to other constituencies, such as the academic community represented by students and faculty members.

Factors Feeding the Need for Internal Accountability

Accreditation and the new institutional management are two important factors in creating the need for internal accountability processes. On one hand, Chile has a national higher education accreditation system. It is viewed as highly committed to the quality of higher education and has become a model throughout Latin America. Thus, to some extent, the accreditation process has led the university sector to be more accountable to various stakeholders. Universities are increasingly becoming more accountable in relation to their finance, management, and academic policy. On the other hand, since the Chilean higher education system operates in an exceedingly competitive market, institutional management is becoming more relevant to institutions willing to improve their performance, especially to those with scarce resources. Therefore, faculty management is also regarded as an important component for university administration.

Last but not least, another factor feeding the need for internal accountability is economics. The University of Chile is in great need for economic resources. Therefore, the University has engaged in more accountability processes to fulfill state requirements that will enable the institution to get more government funding.

Factors Encouraging and Discouraging the Adoption of New Accountability Measures

The long tradition of institutional autonomy enjoyed by the University of Chile can be considered as an element that may discourage the adoption of new accountability measures. However, since there are many complaints about the excess of bureaucratic management as for daily academic operations (e.g., to reserve a classroom, to obtain the signature of authorities for less important paperwork), new managerial practices that can make the institution more expedite in making decisions, would be certainly welcomed by the academic community. In other words, better practices in management could become a significant factor to engage in more accountability processes, putting institutional and individual autonomy at stake.

Notes

1. *Facultades* are the largest academic unit of which the university is composed. It derives from the tradition inherited from the Continental model where Latin American universities found their origins (Bernasconi 2011).
2. As per Andrés Bernasconi's translation.

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