

Higher Education Quality as a Driver of Student Mobilization: The Case of Universidad del Rosario in Colombia

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The literature and research on quality assurance in higher education converge on a fundamental point: there is no single definition of what “quality” means in this context. This concept, which guides public policies at various levels—both nationally and internationally—and shapes how higher education institutions operate to remain competitive in the educational market, is built upon multiple approaches and definitions (Bertolin, 2015). Despite this ambiguity—which can be seen as both a problem and a semantic virtue—there is consensus that students are the most relevant actors in the educational process, as they are directly immersed in it and are the protagonists of their own learning (Darawong & Sandmaung, 2019).

In this vein, Dhawan’s (2022) research, based on a meta-analysis of existing literature, found that the quality of administrative services in higher education institutions shows the strongest correlation with student satisfaction (Allam, 2018; Augustine et al., 2016). This is followed, in order, by the quality of student support services, faculty quality, teaching quality, curriculum quality, and the quality of physical infrastructure. These findings reveal how students perceive and evaluate educational quality, and how they can play an active role in ensuring it—whether through student representation, direct participation in university decision-making, or through disruptive mechanisms such as peaceful protest.

In the Colombian context, it is uncommon for private higher education institutions—especially those ranked among the top three in national and international rankings—to experience protests that have a direct impact on institutional leadership. For this reason, the case of Universidad del Rosario is emblematic, being the only university in the country where students elect the rector (Forbes, 2024).

This case dates back to the first semester of 2024, when students, faculty, and administrative staff mobilized in response to a controversial administration led by then-rector José Alejandro Cheyne. Allegations surfaced regarding unjustified dismissals and financial mismanagement. The protests, which lasted for a month, culminated in the university’s administrative body deciding to remove Cheyne from office (Vásquez, 2024). Subsequently, a new rector was elected, and a new administrative team was formed to address student concerns and implement measures to overcome the institutional crisis.

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Photographs taken by me on April 17, 2024, the day of the protest.

This experience demonstrates the power students can wield in ensuring the quality of higher education, acting as agents of verification and accountability. However, such participatory spaces tend to emerge in times of crisis, highlighting the challenge of institutionalizing permanent mechanisms that allow students to play an active and ongoing role in overseeing university operations and participating in decision-making processes at both institutional and state levels. How can this be achieved? That is the challenge for those of us interested in these issues: to advance empirical research in diverse contexts, gather comparative experiences from around the world, and evaluate their real impact on educational quality.

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