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Reflections of administrative staff on institutional evaluation in a Mexican University

Reflexiones del personal administrativo sobre evaluación institucional en una Universidad Mexicana

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Abstract

The central objective of the study that is recovered in this article was to know the reflections, ideas and conceptions of the administrative and service personnel, regarding the institutional evaluation undertaken in an educational institution in southern Mexico. To do this, it was based on a theoretical review of authors who recover alternative evaluation models. The methodology used was through a qualitative case study and from a comprehensive approach, using documentary review, questionnaires and interviews, which allowed us to recognize the relevant role that the staff themselves distinguish in order to achieve common objectives in the Institute of Education Sciences of the Autonomous University "Benito Juárez" of Oaxaca, in addition to knowing the way in which they have positively assumed the evaluative processes in their daily work. The administrative and service personnel distinguish that institutional evaluation is very relevant in the exercise of substantive university functions and recognize that their work is necessary to maintain adequate standards in administrative services, customer service, management of various material and technological resources, furniture, equipment and in the maintenance of infrastructure.

Keywords: *Institutional evaluation, administrative staff, service staff, responsive evaluation, Mexican University.*

Resumen

El objetivo central del estudio que se recupera en este artículo es conocer las reflexiones, ideas y concepciones del personal administrativo y de servicios, en torno a la evaluación institucional emprendida en una institución educativa del sur de México. Para ello, se sustentó en una revisión teórica de autores que recuperan modelos alternativos de evaluación. La metodología empleada fue mediante un estudio de caso cualitativo y desde el enfoque comprensivo, utilizando la revisión documental, cuestionarios y entrevistas, lo que permitió reconocer el papel relevante que el propio personal distingue en aras de alcanzar objetivos comunes en el Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación de la Universidad Autónoma "Benito Juárez" de Oaxaca, además de saber la manera en que han asumido de manera positiva, los procesos evaluativos en su labor diaria. El personal administrativo y de servicios, distingue que la evaluación institucional es muy relevante en el ejercicio de las funciones sustantivas universitarias y reconocen que su labor es necesaria para mantener los estándares adecuados en los servicios administrativos, atención al público, gestión de diversos recursos materiales, tecnológicos, mobiliario, equipamiento y en el mantenimiento de la infraestructura.

Palabras clave: *Evaluación institucional, personal administrativo, personal de servicios, evaluación respondiente, Universidad Mexicana.*

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Introduction

Administrative staff carry out tasks involving attention to students, teachers, applicants, parents, and the general public, in addition to various activities and projects related to the management of administrative services and human, material, technological, and financial resources, with the aim of contributing to the achievement of the core functions of higher education institutions in Mexico.

Service staff, for their part, perform cleaning, maintenance, and improvement duties in the various infrastructure spaces such as classrooms, restrooms, offices, common areas, green areas, and recreational spaces, among others; they are also responsible for cleaning, repairing, beautifying, and improving the functionality of these spaces.

At times, both administrative and service staff are not considered—or are considered to a lesser extent—when it comes to facilitating the development of activities or projects. However, the case of the Institute of Educational Sciences of the “Benito Juárez” Autonomous University of Oaxaca (ICEUABJO), located in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, becomes highly relevant, as the role of this staff has been taken into account, valued, and acknowledged in order to achieve positive outcomes. An example of this can be seen in the institutional evaluation processes undertaken at the institution, given that this process must be characterized as “a participatory process that involves all members of the educational community, such as students, teachers, administrators, and administrative staff” (Mejía-Cadavid et al., 2023, p. 184).

The case study has long been used as a research methodology in social science projects, mostly from an explanatory perspective. However, there is currently a greater number of studies adopting a comprehensive perspective, as they allow for a detailed approach to a specific “case.” Since a case study was carried out at ICEUABJO, comprehensive theoretical frameworks were also considered invaluable for unveiling, identifying, understanding, critiquing, and highlighting the viewpoints, convergences, and divergences of its various

educational actors regarding their general and detailed conceptions of institutional evaluation.

Based on the above, the main objective of this research was to understand the reflections, ideas, and conceptions of administrative and service staff regarding the institutional evaluation carried out at ICEUABJO, as well as to determine how this staff has approached the evaluation processes in their daily work and to identify whether they distinguish their role and the ways in which they contribute to achieving common goals, along with the criticisms, obstacles, and difficulties that arise in the complexity of their work contexts when institutional evaluation is promoted.

It is important to point out that, in the implemented study, the case of ICEUABJO was analyzed by drawing on the institutional experience of the administrative and service staff who form part of the institution, some of whom have participated for nearly 20 years. Thus, the Institute itself constitutes a unique context—academically, historically, administratively, and politically—which, from a comprehensive perspective, enriches, deepens, and broadens the analysis conducted.

Institutional evaluation has been implemented for several decades from an explanatory perspective, using models and guidelines that consider external criteria and hetero-evaluation, in which external agents establish value judgments regarding specific aspects of educational institutions. Considering alternative models from a comprehensive perspective involves designing evaluation practices that take into account the conceptions and contributions of the various educational actors who participate directly and indirectly in the continuous improvement of schools—those that “permeate all actors and allow different participants not only to resignify the concept but to open spaces that enable reflection and ongoing improvement of the processes associated with it” (Hernández Barbosa & Moreno Cardozo, 2023, p. 225). In this regard, this section revisits several perspectives aligned with this approach, which supports the justification for including administrative and service staff in the consolidation of various projects, “in light of a more integrative view in which the need to give renewed value to the individuals who

participate in it is recognized” (Hernández Barbosa & Moreno Cardozo, 2023, p. 216).

An alternative and comprehensive evaluation model is that proposed by Robert Stake, known as the “client-centered” model, as it conceives the evaluator as an agent who collaborates with teachers—initially primary school teachers—to provide information and elements that contribute to the development of educational services. However, these “clients” are not exclusively primary school teachers; they include actors across all educational levels—“teachers, administrators, curriculum designers, taxpayers, legislators, financial sponsors, and the general public” (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1987, p. 236). Thus, administrative and service staff working in educational spaces also become key agents of evaluative action, as “the organization of educational services will be in constant development according to the activities necessary for planning and implementation” (Kajekai-Juwa et al., 2022, p. 588).

The clients at the center of this model have diverse needs, concerns, ideas, aspirations, challenges, and issues, as well as extensive knowledge of what occurs in their workplace and the implications that arise at different times. Consequently, the evaluator’s role is crucial for identifying the ideas that clients have. This evaluation model used plural, flexible, interactive, holistic, and subjective methodologies, as it was oriented toward service and clients.

Positive or explanatory evaluation approaches focused heavily on obtaining data from a limited source capable of producing measurable or comparable results between objects or processes. Hence, Stake (2005) argued that, in order to understand what is being evaluated, one must consider the totality of what constitutes and interacts with it. This is achieved with information collected, analyzed, and presented from, with, and for diverse sources, ensuring greater integration and completeness of the aspects that help identify key problems. In this way, Stake introduced the notion of responsive evaluation, explaining his position as follows:

Educational evaluation is a “responsive evaluation” when it is directed more toward

the activities of the program than toward its purposes, when it satisfies the informational needs of the audience, and when the different value perspectives presented are intended to account for the program’s success. (Stake, in Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1987, p. 319)

In responsive evaluation, it is essential for the evaluator to approach various clients—specific individuals from whom information is obtained or to whom information is presented—to ensure feedback, as “it is an essential component of any evaluation system. To be effective, it must be specific and oriented toward individual and collective growth” (Alarcón Rubio et al., 2024, pp. 5–6). This interaction allows the evaluator to learn the clients’ particular language and most relevant communication codes, which will be incorporated when preparing reports and conclusions, ensuring better reception and contributing to the identification of the most significant issues.

Following the idea above, the approach to institutional evaluation proposed by Valenzuela et al. is considered here, “understood as one in which the effectiveness and efficiency of an educational institution are determined, both as a workplace and as a provider of services to society” (2011, p. 45). This is consistent with the “benefits” tied to various basic beliefs and convictions generated and shared by members of an educational community regarding curricular, didactic, administrative, social, and financial areas within institutional life. Institutional evaluation can also be understood as “an essential process that allows for assessing the quality of an institution as a whole through critical reflection aimed at implementing changes and making decisions for its improvement and for achieving its goals” (Mejía-Cadavid et al., 2023, p. 185).

It is evident that evaluators cannot assume that subjectivity will not appear in research and evaluation processes, as these are human activities involving diverse interests that reflect the wide range of ideas and conceptions held by participants. In this regard, Guba & Lincoln (cited by House & Howe, 2001) propose a hermeneutic–dialectical approach to

evaluation, in which evaluators listen to and make heard all voices involved in institutional processes during evaluation, as “the various conceptions of institutional evaluation help adopt positions aimed at generating a learning culture within educational institutions” (Navarro Vilorio, 2022, p. 14). Thus:

Evaluators must design evaluations in which relevant interests are represented and in which there is some balance of power among them, which often means representing the interests of those who might otherwise be excluded from the discussion... Determining and weighing these interests is extremely complex, uncertain, and often debatable. (House & Howe, 2001, p. 142)

The most suitable means evaluators have for listening to, understanding, and incorporating the opinions and voices of all individuals involved in an evaluation is dialogue, in order to “promote collective reflection regarding a self-assessment that will lead to changes allowing institutions to face the future with significant improvements” (Navarro Vilorio, 2022, p. 14). This results in a democratic evaluation that gathers what participants—such as administrative and service staff working in universities—identify as opportunities to strengthen a project, along with its problems and practices that lead to success and meaningful achievements.

Methodology

In line with the alternative models of institutional evaluation presented in the previous section, the research methodology designed and implemented—and detailed in this article—was a case study, which, according to Soto & Escibano (2019), “is useful for diagnosing or thoroughly evaluating a particular situation in the school-educational sphere” (p. 203).

Mendizábal (2006) distinguishes between structured designs and flexible designs in qualitative research, specifically in the social sciences. Structured designs are characterized by methodological rigor, in which concepts, authors, and theories constitute an essential and indispensable reference, and in which

methodological approaches must be followed “to the letter.”

In contrast, a flexible research design articulates five substantial components in a logical and coherent manner: “purposes, conceptual context, epistemological assumptions, research questions, method, and quality criteria” (Mendizábal, 2006, p. 72). The first three elements set the basis for determining and/or constructing the most appropriate method, considering the criteria that guarantee the quality of the work (credibility–authenticity, transferability, dependability–auditability, and confirmability). The case study method developed in this research at ICEUABJO followed a flexible design, grounded in a qualitative approach and a comprehensive perspective. The fieldwork was conducted with administrative and service personnel and is detailed in subsequent paragraphs and pages.

In this regard, the study was carried out specifically in the Bachelor’s Degree in Educational Sciences, which is part of the academic offerings of the Institute of Educational Sciences at the “Benito Juárez” Autonomous University of Oaxaca (UABJO). More broadly, the study considered the various reference frameworks of evaluation agencies—the Interinstitutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CIEES) and the Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education (COPAES)—as part of the process through which evaluation policies were incorporated into autonomous state higher education institutions in Mexico from the 1990s to the present.

A proposal that helped to better understand this educational policy (evaluation) involved contextualizing it and recovering the particularities and characterizations expressed by the educational actors themselves at ICEUABJO. For this reason, the experience of the Bachelor’s Degree in Educational Sciences was essential to consider as a case study from the perspective of administrative and service staff, given the results obtained within a context as complex and unique as that of UABJO.

To thoroughly analyze the case and the role of the personnel working at ICEUABJO (who are also conceived as the units of analysis in this study)

regarding institutional evaluation, a general review of institutional documents and archives was conducted, and interviews and questionnaires were administered to the educational actors previously mentioned. From these results, the ideas expressed by participants were recovered in detail, allowing the researchers to explain and understand institutional evaluation, reflecting the appropriation, reflection, and critiques surrounding the aspects involved in such evaluation—namely, “conceptions or perspectives that recognize the complexity of situations, contexts, factors, and conditions involved in these processes” (Pérez-Arenas, 2010, p. 19). These are analyzed in the next section of this article.

As Briones (1988) states, the term *analysis* refers to a process that seeks to identify, within the collected information, particular configurations or aspects that stand out on their own or in combination with other social objects studied. For this reason, the categories of , related to the actors from whom information was collected, focused on the administrative and service staff at ICEUABJO—employees who provide general services to students and teachers. All job categories were considered: coordinators, area supervisors, secretaries, librarians, service assistants, transportation officers, gardeners, and academic assistants who worked at ICEUABJO during the 2021–2022 period, including both unionized and non-unionized staff.

Research instruments allow information to be obtained at specific moments and promote the development of techniques that make it possible to identify, understand, critique, reflect upon, articulate, and triangulate what is understood about a research process within a specific institutional, geographic, and historical context.

From the perspective of Díaz-Barriga (2015), research processes unfold in two major phases, which together shape a methodology: the documentary phase and the field phase.

For the documentary phase, this study used original sources of information that broadened the understanding of the historical conditions and ways in which institutional evaluation has been carried out at ICEUABJO.

For the field phase, the following were used in the research conducted at ICEUABJO: questionnaires, interviews, and observation. According to Knobel & Lankshear (2003), questionnaires help obtain extensive information that can be adequately organized; interviews provide access to individuals’ opinions, reflections, and beliefs about a phenomenon; and observation grants access to certain degrees of interaction and understanding of what occurs in everyday life.

According to the authors referenced in this section, and in a general and synthetic manner, three research techniques were used in the study carried out with administrative and service personnel to gather information and data about how they conceive their role in the implementation of institutional evaluation at ICEUABJO: (1) review of institutional archives, (2) the survey (questionnaire), and (3) the interview, always maintaining the level of depth established in the methodological design.

Regarding the review of institutional archives, access was obtained through information available on ICEUABJO’s website as well as on the websites of agencies that conduct institutional evaluations in Mexico, to gather relevant methodological references applicable to universities. For the questionnaire and the interview, care was taken to ensure consistency between the content of the questions and the general objective of the study explained in the introduction. These three techniques were considered to guarantee validity and reliability within a qualitative approach and based on the methodological flexibility required by the contextual conditions. Specifically:

- Validation of the content and structure of the instruments by a specialist in research methodology and another expert in theoretical and methodological aspects of institutional evaluation.
- Pilot testing to ensure the appropriate structure of the instruments, the clarity of the writing, and the consistency of each question.
- Triangulation of the information obtained from different sources and job categories of administrative and service staff at ICEUABJO.

It is worth noting that the validity and reliability addressed in this study were internal, as no type of generalization is sought in a case study; rather, the aim is to gain in-depth knowledge, reflection, and understanding of what occurs within the institutional context.

Results and Discussion

Administrative and service staff play a significant role in the implementation of institutional evaluation processes, even when their activity is not recorded as being central within the institutions themselves. For this reason, this article presents the most relevant results regarding how they conceive institutional evaluation at the ICEUABJO.

The administrative and service staff of the ICEUABJO is made up of 20 people, of whom 12 completed the questionnaire. Of these, 58.3% were female and 41.7% male. Two had between 1 and 5 years of service, five between 6 and 10 years, three between 11 and 15 years, and two between 21 and 25 years of administrative service. Due to union restrictions, only those who freely agreed to participate responded, as they are subject to union rules external to this study and institution, which advise them not to provide information regarding their work activities, based on notions of individual confidentiality and collective protection as union members.

Twelve people—60% of staff—answered the online questionnaire via Google Forms, representing the majority of administrative positions held by unionized staff and some trusted employees: coordinator, secretary, service assistant, librarian, transport officer, and academic assistant.

To enrich, deepen, and triangulate the information obtained, two individuals who agreed to participate in this study were interviewed: Interviewee 1, with 24 years of service, and Interviewee 2, with 9 years. For purposes of systematizing the information collected, the interviews are referred to in this article as Interview 1 and Interview 2, ensuring confidentiality of the data obtained. It is worth noting that, despite union restrictions discouraging participation, both workers voluntarily collaborated and even consented to being recorded through electronic means.

Interviewee 1 holds a professional degree and is a graduate of the UABJO. He also completed a Master's degree in Education at the same Institute. He is the most senior administrative employee at the ICEUABJO and has worked there since its creation; therefore, his perspective and experience are broad not only regarding institutional evaluation processes but administrative processes in general, characterized by kindness, efficiency, and warmth. Interviewee 2, on the other hand, performs an essential activity in schools that is often undervalued or overlooked: maintaining cleanliness of facilities. For this reason, it is particularly interesting to understand how institutional evaluation processes are incorporated into the ICE and what they mean in his daily work.

Evaluation is conceived by administrative and service staff as improvement and measurement, consistent with the formal discourse promoted in Mexican higher education institutions for more than 20 years. It is also associated with enhancement, standards, and control—the latter not from a critical perspective, but rather as a component of administrative procedure.

These ideas are complemented by definitions expressed in interviews, such as “a process of measurement and decision-making” (Interview 1) and “a resource to motivate teachers, workers, and administrative staff to improve” (Interview 2). In both cases, evaluation is understood as an element that supports assessment of their own work and, in turn, decision-making oriented toward continuous improvement.

The questionnaire results show the following: 33.3% believe teamwork is most closely related to the educational institution, 25% associate it with excellence, 16.7% with collectivity, 8.3% with participation, 8.3% with relevance, and 8.3% with decision-making. These responses clearly reflect the connection between these concepts and their daily work, as also noted in interviews, where they describe themselves as part of the institution and acknowledge the significance of their administrative and support roles in contributing to students' academic formation.

Quality, verification, enhancement, and standards are terms used by the administrative and service staff to conceptualize institutional evaluation. These concepts

belong to the common discourse used in higher education institutions to legitimize and promote evaluative processes, supported by institutional development policies since the 1990s.

These terms align with the explanatory and quantitative approaches typically used by institutions, justified as serving the needs of various educational actors. This appears, for example, when staff members describe institutional evaluation as a general measurement process affecting the entire institution in order to achieve good results for students and teachers.

Another recurring term—control—reflects the perception of how educational authorities act within this context. Through evaluation, institutions have exercised influence over structures, processes, and projects, regardless of whether they are autonomous, federal, state, public, or private.

On the other hand, political, social, and cultural factors also shape the evaluation processes undertaken in educational institutions. For administrative and service staff, educational policies guide the work of schools and consequently the way they are evaluated. A relevant point raised was the responsibility institutions and evaluators must exercise in addressing social needs while respecting the cultural diversity of the actors involved.

The UABJO is the largest higher education institution in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, based on student enrollment. It is a complex institution with significant internal challenges, problems, and dynamics. In such a diverse environment, implementing evaluation processes becomes “difficult”, as strikes, protests, and building takeovers often interrupt planned actions and generate contingencies.

Administrative and service staff are intimately familiar with the political and social mobilization that characterizes the UABJO. At the ICE, located within the main University City campus, this staff is crucial for organizing onsite evaluation visits, preparing facilities, maintaining equipment, and ensuring infrastructure readiness—tasks that intensify when accrediting bodies are scheduled to visit. Given these conditions, staff members readily identify these

processes within their daily work and consider themselves active participants.

A recurring perception about evaluation processes at the ICE is that they guide continuous improvement while identifying strengths and weaknesses. Staff members also believe they have contributed to the foundations upon which the ICEUABJO has been built today—a distinctive perception that attributes a meaningful historical and formative role to institutional evaluation.

Accordingly, institutional evaluation is seen as contributing to the institute’s prestige both within and outside the UABJO, ensuring quality services and strong projects, and emphasizing teamwork among its members.

Regarding the surveyed staff, 75% considered it *highly relevant*, and 25% *relevant*, that the ICEUABJO comply with all regulations and requirements established by evaluation bodies. Reasons offered in interviews included: promoting continuous improvement, encouraging teamwork, creating a healthy environment, and fostering harmony within the Institute.

Participants were also asked whether the accreditation status of the Bachelor’s Degree in Educational Sciences influenced their decision to work at the ICEUABJO. 41.7% strongly agreed, 41.7% agreed, and 16.7% were neutral. Staff members with more than 20 years of service noted that such processes did not exist in university policies at the time they were hired.

When asked whether they would prefer to work in a *non-accredited* institution, 41.7% disagreed, 25% disagreed, and 33.3% were neutral. Interviewees expressed satisfaction with their work at the ICE and stated they would remain there as long as possible.

Administrative and service staff consider institutional evaluation to be highly relevant to the core university functions. Importantly, they recognize that their work is essential for maintaining appropriate standards in administrative processes, public service, and the management of material, technological, and infrastructure resources. In most cases, their work is recognized by individuals in higher administrative or

managerial positions, and they view themselves as key promoters and agents contributing to institutional evaluation at the ICEUABJO.

Conclusion

The educational institution, understood as a formative, collective, and professional entity, is perceived by administrative and service staff as both a formal and informal space—which may or may not be physically delimited—where students are trained and teamwork is promoted. In this regard, the staff themselves recognize the strategic role that university educational institutions play in the comprehensive development and formation of students.

The study summarized in this article made it possible to understand the reflections, ideas, and conceptions developed by administrative and service staff regarding the institutional evaluation carried out at ICEUABJO over several decades. It was also very insightful to obtain results about the role that this staff assumes as promoters of institutional evaluation, as well as the sense of belonging they demonstrate by contributing to the achievement of institutional objectives.

Furthermore, Mexican educational policies from the 1990s to the present—particularly those related to institutional evaluation in higher education from an official and formal perspective—were gradually incorporated into UABJO and ICEUABJO from the mid-2000s onward.

The administrative and service staff of ICEUABJO, each with their own viewpoints, recognize that these policies were designed and implemented through sectoral plans, programs, and project guidelines within the national educational system, and that over time they became part of daily work routines. Examples include more detailed review, control, and monitoring of their tasks, as well as the development of a culture of producing evidence such as signed and generated documents, photographs, videos, work meetings, and other activities intended to gather information on how their professional duties were being carried out.

In this light, evaluation is perceived by most administrative and service staff at ICEUABJO as a

gradual and ongoing process that always champions the continuous improvement of the processes under review. From the perspective of those interviewed and surveyed, the phased nature of these actions allows for adjustments as they are implemented.

The discourse of the interviewees clearly reflects the influence of explanatory approaches to evaluative models, especially since most evaluating and accrediting agencies conceive these processes according to explanatory models of measurement and qualification. However, some staff also demonstrated knowledge of alternative models and even suggested adopting certain components of them for future development within the institute.

Regarding how administrative and service staff perceive their own workplace, there is a clear positive conception of ICEUABJO, viewed as an institution of prestige, excellence, and quality, where teamwork is evident.

With regard to the incorporation of evaluative practices in the institute's institutional work, more than 70% of administrative and service staff stated that they completely agree that the Institute should comply with all regulations, guidelines, and requirements established by evaluating bodies. They also mentioned the extraordinary funding previously received and emphasized the continuous improvement and academic prestige gained as a result of collective effort.

The processes and results obtained through institutional evaluation have made it possible to identify strengths and weaknesses, which could then be maintained or addressed. Each evaluative process also generated recommendations that outlined concrete actions to improve various aspects experienced in daily work. At these moments, administrative and service staff recognize the relevance of their role—directly or indirectly—in improving the areas where they can contribute, with the aim of achieving the collective and institutional objectives set for specific periods.

Finally, based on the study conducted and the valuable information provided by the administrative and service staff, it is evident that institutional

evaluation was incorporated into ICEUABJO as part of the institution's own evolution, aimed at continuous improvement in academic, administrative, cultural, outreach, and management areas. At times, this incorporation occurred due to recommendations, requirements, or external mandates from higher authorities; at other times, it was driven by the need to secure extraordinary funding for infrastructure projects, service improvements, acquisition of furniture and equipment, and their maintenance.

Overall, the contributions of administrative and service staff highlight the significant level of ownership these educational actors have developed toward evaluation processes. Alongside other key stakeholders—such as students and academic staff—they were essential in ensuring that institutional evaluation became a priority at ICEUABJO and continues to be present in higher education institutions in Oaxaca and throughout Mexico.

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