

## THE INSTITUTIONAL OBSERVATORY AS A STRATEGY TO CONTRIBUTE TO EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

### *O OBSERVATÓRIO INSTITUCIONAL COMO ESTRATÉGIA PARA CONTRIBUIR PARA A EQUIDADE NA EDUCAÇÃO SUPERIOR*

### *EL OBSERVATORIO INSTITUCIONAL COMO ESTRATEGIA PARA CONTRIBUIR A LA EQUIDAD EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR*

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**ABSTRACT:** The proposal for an Institutional Observatory of Equity at the Autonomous University of Tabasco de Juarez (UJAT), in Mexico, is the product of the research project Regional Observatory for the Quality of Equity in Higher Education (ORACLE), sponsored by the European Union through the Erasmus+ programme. In this project, 35 Higher Education Institutions from 16 Latin American and 5 European countries participate, and among other things, proposes the systematic observation and registration of equity policies in higher education institutions. The proposal presented here is conceived as a strategy to contribute to equity in higher education. Its objective is to obtain information for the analysis, monitoring and evaluation of equity policies implemented by UJAT. To this end, it addresses the concept of equity, some policies implemented by UJAT and defines the activities in which the observatory may have the greatest impact.

**KEYWORDS:** Observatory. Equity. Higher education.

**RESUMO:** *A proposta de um Observatório da Equidade Institucional na Universidade Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco (UJAT), no México, é um produto do projeto de pesquisa Observatório Regional da Qualidade da Equidade na Educação Superior (ORACLE), patrocinado pela União Europeia para através do programa Erasmus +. Neste projeto, 35 Instituições de Ensino Superior de 16 países da América Latina e 5 países europeus participam e entre outras coisas, propõe a observação e o registro sistemático de políticas de equidade em instituições de ensino superior. A proposta apresentada aqui é concebida como uma estratégia para contribuir para a equidade no ensino superior. Seu objetivo é obter informações para a análise, monitoramento e avaliação das políticas de equidade implementadas pela UJAT. Para isso, define-se a*

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*concepção de equidade, algumas políticas implementadas pela UJAT e as atividades em que o observatório pode ter o maior impacto.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Observatório. Equidade. Educação superior.*

**RESUMEN:** *La propuesta de un Observatorio Institucional de Equidad en la Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco (UJAT), en México, es producto del proyecto de investigación Observatorio Regional para la Calidad de la Equidad en la Educación Superior (ORACLE), auspiciado por la Unión Europea a través del programa Erasmus+. En este proyecto, participan 35 Instituciones de Educación Superior de 16 países latinoamericanos y 5 europeos y entre otras cosas, propone la observación y registro sistemático de las políticas de equidad en las instituciones de educación superior. La propuesta que aquí se presenta se concibe como una estrategia para contribuir a la equidad en la educación superior. Su objetivo es la obtención de información para el análisis, seguimiento y evaluación de las políticas de equidad implementadas por la UJAT. Para ello, se aborda la concepción de la equidad, algunas políticas implementadas por la UJAT y se definen las actividades en las que el observatorio puede tener mayor incidencia.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Observatorio. Equidad. Educación superior.*

## Introduction

Undoubtedly, equity in education is of paramount importance in the current scenario of deep and persistent social and educational inequalities. Despite the policies, young people in vulnerable situations who do not receive adequate care continue to be excluded, so the discussion about what educational equity is, is not exhausted.

UNESCO considers that equity in education involves:

Educate according to individual differences and needs, without economic, demographic, geographical, ethical or gender conditions, being an impediment to learning. Thus, educational equity refers to taking into account the unequal situation of students and their families, communities and schools, offering special support to those who need it, so that educational objectives are achieved by the largest number of students (UNESCO, 2002, p. 82).

People from unfavorable sectors (for social, economic, gender or ethnic reasons) who apply for higher education are those who can survive a history of inequalities. Therefore, specifying equal opportunities would not only facilitate access to higher education for those who can complete high school and achieve a good performance in the selection test, but also generate conditions for young people to effectively develop their potential throughout their career.

In universities, policies are implemented to overcome the inequities in access to educational services that they offer, however, it is necessary to recognize that, despite these

efforts, a large percentage of young people between 18 and 24 years have not yet entered higher education (SEP, 2014).

To support students' entry into the University, it is necessary to structure and design mechanisms that ensure monitoring, as well as provide information that supports decision-making that results in the formulation and implementation of educational policies that promote equity.

One of these mechanisms are observatories, which have the mission of monitoring and detecting what is happening in their field of action, and their added value is based on: 1) in search of information, 2) discern its relevance, 3) organize it coherently and 4) presenting it clearly (BASQUE GOVERNMENT, 2008).

The work presented here aims to disseminate a proposal for the functional structure of an Institutional Observatory for the Quality of Equity at the Autonomous University of Tabasco, Mexico, which derives from a research project called Regional Observatory for the Quality of Equity in Higher Education.

### **Equity policies in higher education**

Equity policies in Mexico have become a constant in both their regulations and government programs. Thus, it is observed that the third constitutional article recognizes the importance of education and the right of each individual to receive it (DOF, 2016). However, in the National Development Plan 2012-2018, published by (GOVERNO DA REPÚBLICA, 2012, p. 125) in its Mexico goal with quality education, it was established as the objective of ensuring inclusion and equity in the educational system and as a strategy to expand opportunities for access to education in all regions and sectors of the population.

This implies considering three important aspects related to equity: effective access, compensation for inequalities and permanence.

If the public university is responsible for the commitment to the social democratization of access opportunities, it will be necessary to seek this equity recognizing the different social, economic and cultural conditions of the candidates. According to (MOKATE, 2002, p. 17):

Equal access represents an advance in the concept of equal supply, as it is not limited to a view of equality based on supply, but is also associated with certain aspects of demand. Ensuring equal access requires us to recognize that claimants are characterized by very different conditions that affect their ability and condition to be able to respond or react to an offer or an opportunity and make adjustments to level the playing field under which several claimants may resort to the opportunity offered. These adjustments make it necessary to

facilitate transportation or to place additional establishments for the provision of services in areas of low population density; educate and inform demand among groups that may not have information or conviction about the service or program being offered; equalize the costs (monetary and non-monetary) of going to service etc. Equalizing access involves making the relative effort that the user has to make to take advantage of the approximately equal service or program.

Countries like Mexico have bet on compensatory policies based on access. But this is not enough, as it is necessary to support to ensure the permanence and development of appropriate faculties or competencies, to meet quality. Compensatory policies must be made within the school, through support for programs that ensure the development of skills, the realization of learning, the offer of opportunities for success for students (MONZÓN 2015, p. 9), which leads us to reaffirm what Red said, cited by (SILVA-LAYA, 2012, p. 18) that when access to higher education is favored without offering necessary support to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the open door becomes a revolving door through which they leave again.

### **Brief historical-institutional evolution of quality and equity treatment at the Juárez Autonomous University of Tabasco.**

In recent decades, higher education institutions have experienced growing expectations and felt needs on the part of society around educational quality and equity, which involved a comprehensive review of their policies, especially those related to the access and equity of different social groups in relation to the services they offer and the population they address.

According to UNESCO, good quality education, taught by competent and well-supported teachers, is a right of all children, young people and adults, not the privilege of the few. It also points out that equity is about

provide all students with the best opportunities to reach their full potential and take steps to address disadvantaged situations that limit educational achievement. Equity implies special treatment and measures aimed at combating historical and social disadvantages that prevent students from accessing and benefiting from education alike (UNESCO, 2015, p. 1).

Under this tenor, equity means ensuring equal opportunities for access to quality education for the entire population, providing all the necessary resources and aid (UNESCO, 2007, p. 5). The lack of equity in higher education is a problem that must be addressed from federal, state and institutional development plans that decisively aim at a change in the distribution of the population entering, but especially for the most unprotected sectors.

Similarly, the conditions of permanence are, in turn, another situation that deserves more attention, especially in the financial, academic and social aspects, from which students must be provided to facilitate their inclusion in the system, but which also allows them to successfully complete the training phase, with results that promote their transition to productive insertion in society.

Faced with this challenge, quality and equity have become a major problem on the agendas of many countries, and educational institutions have gained a greater role. In the case of UJAT, attention to vulnerable groups has become more important in the first two decades of this century, however, it has been addressed from a somewhat limited perspective, which has resulted in policies and strategies weakly articulated with each other or with little follow-up in relation to vulnerable groups.

For example, in the 2004-2008 development plan, the level at which it referred is to teachers, "Establish networks of interdivisional collaboration to ensure greater integration of academic bodies that translates into productivity and equity, favoring the reduction of quality gaps currently existing among academic divisions" (UJAT, 2004, p. 86).

It also mentions that "collegiate must be strengthened and promoted within their competencies, an institution with its own identity that, in addition to fully empowering its students and making relevant contributions to the social environment, respects diversity and promotes equity (UJAT, 2004, p. 93).

In the Strategic Development Plan 2006-2016 (PDET) (UJAT, 2006), the inclusion of marginalized sectors is placed as part of the policies of Cultural Dissemination and University Extension, but in its challenges, it is pointed only to the education of the elderly (UJAT, 2006).

In the period 2008-2012, the Development Plan stated that,

Allied to relevance, the response that the university gives to social needs and expectations must have the quality of an unrestricted search for equity, which means creating environments in which the university understands the right of access to education, regardless of the condition and circumstances of the candidates, and that integrates with the institutional community, that is, provide equal access to common learning and training under the same conditions and with the same supports for their development and performance (UJAT, 2008, p. 85).

Continuing with this theme, in the 2012-2016 Development Plan, it was mentioned that, despite what has been done, there is still much to be done, since:

the Health Prevention, Sexual Education and Addiction Program needs to be strengthened in the 11 Academic Divisions; expand support coverage for students with economic difficulties, strengthen psychopedagogical clinics;

increase the graduation, graduation and retention rate; train them on the themes of gender equity, value formation, environmental care and sustainability; promoting a love of sport, culture and the arts and inculcating, even in graduates, an entrepreneurial attitude (UJAT, 2012, p. 68) (our translation).

The same plan also identifies the following aspects in relation to equity and quality:

- It reflects the urgency of the University to expand access to higher education with equity, relevance and maintenance of the quality levels achieved.
- Expand educational coverage, with relevance and equity, creating new school spaces and strengthening the Open University System and Distance (p. 88).
- It is guaranteed to expand coverage with relevance, quality and equity through the strengthening of educational supply, teaching through information technologies, as well as the opening of new spaces to meet the demand of young people from Tabasco and the region to have access to Higher Education (p. 107).
- The offer of Educational Programs of the University will be expanded in its different modalities and levels with relevance and equity (p. 107).
- Carry out, through the Divisional Committees, Monitoring of Graduate Students and Employers of all Educational Programs analyzing their relevance, quality and equity (p. 108).
- Promote the University Distance Education System to promote the coverage of higher education with equity and relevance (p. 108).
- Expand programs to prevent addiction and gender equity (p. 115).
- Conduct and disseminate a gender equity program among university students (p. 145).

Currently, the University with regard to equity in its 2016-2020 Development Plan notes that

It is an institution with a national and international presence, socially responsible and inclusive, which contributes to the sustainable development of Tabasco and Mexico, through quality educational programs that empower ethical and competitive professionals in the global area. It stands out for its relevant contributions in the transfer of science and technology, respect and promotion of culture and effective links with its environment, within the framework of a modern management that promotes human rights, integral health, transparency and accountability (UJAT, 2016, p. 41).



Among UJAT's commitments to educational quality are: PC1: Promoting equity in access to higher education (p. 54) and PC2: Prioritizing the growth and diversification of the provision of educational programs in their different modalities and levels with quality, relevance and equity (p. 54)

Similarly, the document of the Long-Term Development Plan 2028 refers to:

Considering the needs of each region of the entity, this Alma Mater facilitates access to quality higher education services through the strategic location of its 12 academic divisions, as well as its two Distance Education Centers; The latter enables the professional training of those who combine work schedules with their studies, or transfer problems because they have a disability or because they live in areas far from the Institution (UJAT, 2015, p. 27).

In this plan, quality is understood as: "Characteristic that permeates the whole university life to fulfill institutional functions in excellent accordance with the needs and expectations of society in each historical moment" (UJAT, 2015, p. 36).

In turn, equity as a "principle that defends equal rights, under the same conditions, regardless of gender, realities, circumstances, thought and ideology of individuals or social groups" (UJAT, 2015, p. 36).

In the context of social responsibility, he mentions that, "it will maintain its autonomous character, helping to consolidate the role of higher education as a public good and as a factor in promoting social inclusion. To this end, it will continue to ensure equity in access by strengthening and establishing appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination and inequalities affecting vulnerable groups; in addition to strengthening its ties with higher education and increasing coverage according to the evolution of demand" (UJAT, 2015, p. 64)

### **The Institutional Observatory of Equity as initiatives to contribute to equity in higher education.**

For the Royal Academy of Languages, an observatory is a "place or position that serves to make observations"; "observation" is "action and effect of observation"; and "to observe" is to "examine carefully, to look carefully and to react, to glimpse."

This definition is indicative, but insufficient to define and model an observatory for the quality of equity in higher education. It is a qualified observatory in the first place because it only looks at equity. The concept of equity has varied over time since being associated with justice, which consisted of giving everyone their own, the conceptualization we have today, which is associated with equality, non-discrimination and inclusion.

In turn, HUSILLOS (2006, p. 151) points out that the term observatory is faithful to its Latin *etymology to observe and that* it means carefully examining or studying, alerting or perceiving something, observing or pointing, and the literal definition describes an appropriate place to make observations.

A very important fact that this author provides is that the concept evolves with two different approaches: the first, related to information warehouses and reports, and the second, with more dynamic forms based on collaboration that stimulate communication and promote reflection.

In this work, equity has a specific and singular connotation: it analyzes the educational determinants that generate unfair inequalities in higher education. It is not a question of accompanying education, but about inequality, that is, about the injustice derived from a relationship between two points. This, in the understanding that there is a link between education and vulnerability, and that the system produces and reproduces this inequality.

The Institutional Observatory of Equity of the Autonomous University of Tabasco de Juárez is part of the Regional Observatory for the Quality of Equity in Higher Education (ORACLE), which was conceived as a supranational structure that today works with the collaborative support of institutional equity observatories of the 35 higher education institutions from 5 European countries and 15 in Latin America, that work on a network and as global network nodes<sup>4</sup>.

These observatories are constituted as networks that fulfill various functions, such as monitoring, evaluation and control of certain aspects of public interest, as well as the identification of areas of opportunity that are likely to be intervened or resolved.

In the case of the Institutional Observatory of Equity of the Autonomous University of Tabasco de Juárez, it will have the function of looking at the policies it generates, configuring a privileged space of participation among all actors, seeking to promote organizational changes to lead to the improvement of the quality of equity.

Likewise, it will issue studies and reports with data obtained through previous experiences and successful methodologies, with the objectives of:

- a) Diagnose the situation of the different groups.

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<sup>4</sup>Latin American Universities: **UCB-Bolivia; UMRPSXCH-Bolivia; UNESP-Brasil; UNB-Brasil; UTALCA-Chile; UT-Colômbia; U da Colômbia; ITCR-Costa Rica; UCR-Costa Rica; UCF-Cuba; UES-El Salvador; UJMD-El Salvador; ESPOL-Ecuador; UNEMI-Ecuador; URL-Guatemala; FLACSO-Guatemala; UDELAS- Panamá; UIP-Panamá; UNAN-Nicarágua, UNAN-LEÓN-Nicarágua; UV-México; UCP-Paraguai; NA-Paraguai, IUACJ-Uruguai; ORT-Uruguai; ULA-Venezuela; UCV-Venezuela.** European Universities: **FHJ-Áustria; AAU-Dinamarca, UAB-Espanha; UNIBG-Itália; IPL-Portugal.**

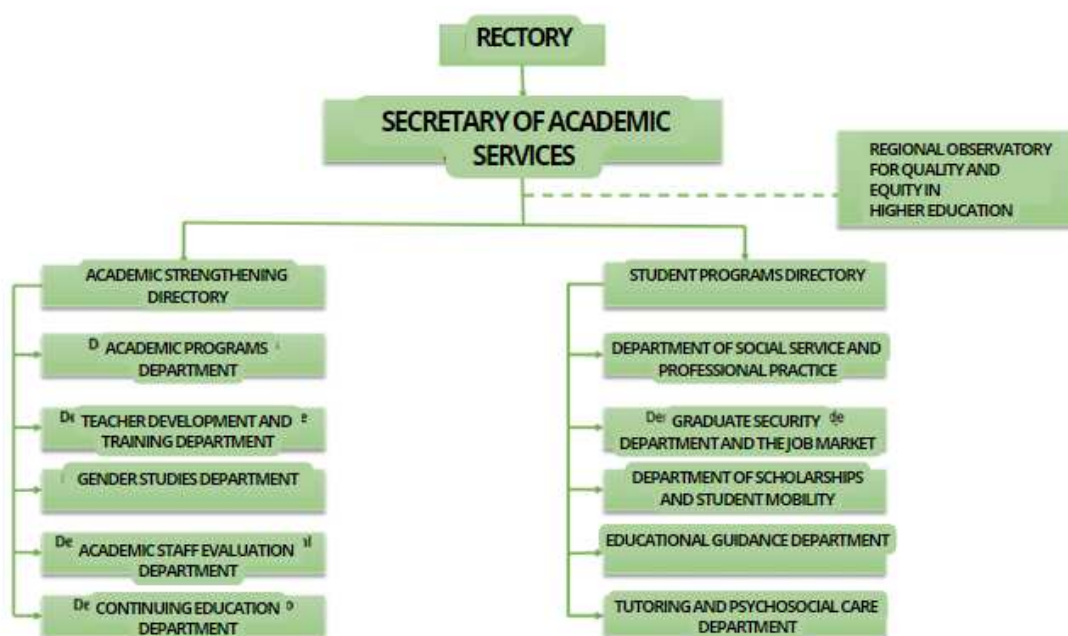


- b) Generate models to evaluate the quality and innovation of the university.
- c) Identify the degree of equity with which higher education institutions design their policies and actions.

To these objectives, the Institutional Observatory should contribute to making UJAT a fair university among all citizens and providing equal quality assurance for the entire population.

The Observatory is inserted in UJAT as follows:

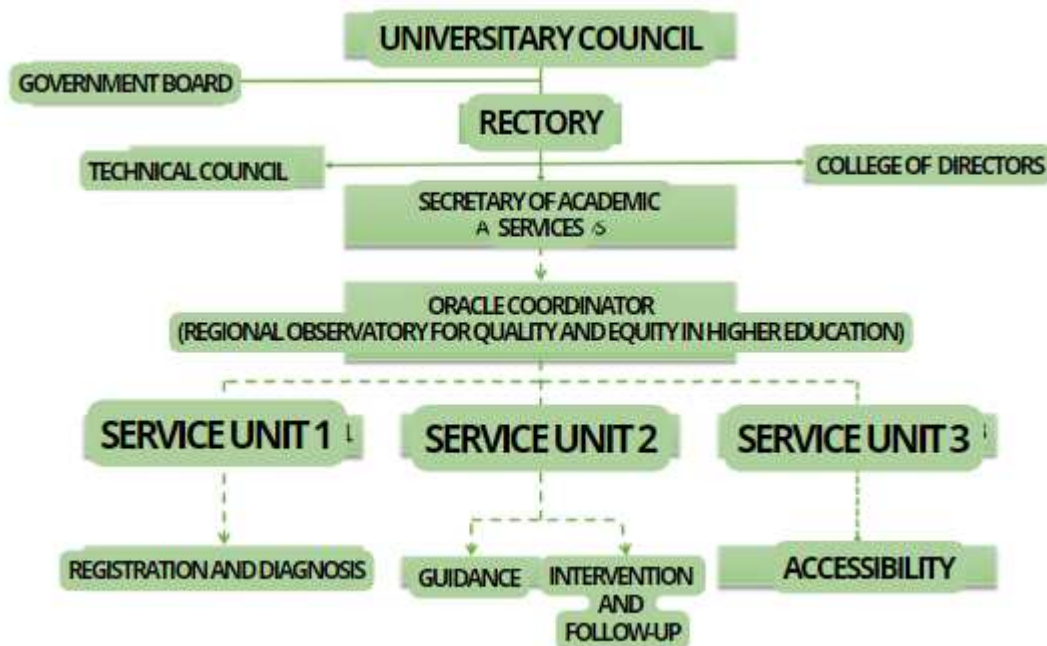
**Figure 1** – Flowchart of the Institutional Observatory



Source: Prepared by the authors

With regard to the Institutional Observatory of Equity (OEI) and based on the organization chart of UJAT and the dependencies related to quality and equity at different levels, the following structure is proposed:

**Figure 2** – Flowchart of the University Council



Source: Prepared by the authors

From the observatory, policies, regulations, action plans, budgets and coverage for the attention of properties can be generated in coordination with the indicated areas, since, in the diagnosis made in UJAT and the available evidence, they show us that so far there are groups that have not received any attention and in others they have only been attended in one way, For instance:

1. Gender equality. There is a department in the university, policies, regulations, action plans have been generated, has a budget and coverage is at the institutional level, covering all levels.
2. Students with disabilities are attended to, but there are no policies, regulations or examples for their attention. Specifically, the Academic Division of Education and Arts has a program, but there is no action plan, nor is there a budget or record of good practices for your attention.
3. Academic and administrative teams with disabilities, so far, no policy or regulations have been generated, let alone instances, action plans, budget and coverage. In fact, there is no record of how many there are in UJAT.

4. Students from indigenous groups. There is only information about them after their admission to university, but there is no follow-up or support for their academic career.
5. Students with LOW HDI, you have policies, regulations, instances, budget and coverage, but like previous policies, there is no follow-up of them.

## **Final Considerations**

The UJAT Equity Observatory was inaugurated on July 5, 2019 and the operation is based on the academic bodies participating in the ORACLE project. This team of research teachers has the responsibility to propose, monitor, evaluate the equity policies promoted by the institution, as well as conduct research, propose training and updating courses on equity, support teachers and students in the adaptation of curricula and study materials. The task is not easy, but there are some significant advances in the integration of the equity of vulnerable groups as an emerging line of research in the newly created Doctorate in Education. This action will allow not only payment in the research area, but the training of human resources at the undergraduate level through theses, social work, professional practices, among others.

Through this observatory, it is expected to increase indicators of equity of vulnerable groups, such as obtaining specific annual resources for the implementation of institutional policies in favor of these groups, the creation of an equity plan for vulnerable groups within the institution, the development of a regulation for the implementation of the equity of vulnerable groups that allows monitoring, the formation of a national network that stimulates the exchange of experiences and enriches the processes of implementation of the equity of vulnerable groups in HEIs, in addition to promoting links with the federal legislature and state legislatures.

Systematization and monitoring of induction sessions, results of admission exams, socioeconomic studies and analysis to characterize new students are some of the strategies of this observatory to provide equity options and implement corrective programs and / or propaedeutic or leveling courses that allow all students to have the ideal profile to start their undergraduate courses.

These strategies will allow the Institutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CIEES) and the accrediting committees to have evidence of the existence of equity of vulnerable groups in their operation, coverage, operation and results of the observatory.

In Mexico, addressing the equity of vulnerable groups represents one of the purposes in the educational field; UJAT, aware of this commitment, values all students to give them a

treatment that favors overcoming social inequalities, which allows the development of a fair and balanced society based on Human Rights, in order to enhance the qualities of each being.

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