

Saber PRO tests, a challenge for education in Colombia

Las pruebas saber pro, un desafío a la educación en Colombia

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Abstract

The article presents a thoughtful analysis of the state tests implementation as a classification mechanism, a classification that can be understood from several points of view. Firstly, educational institutions must fulfil in with convinced quality standards issued by international organizations who acknowledge the development of the educational process in perfect environments. They leave aside substantial conditions and the difficulties of accessibility to resources of most of the un-

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derdeveloped countries in which these tests are applied. Secondly, the most neuralgic aspect of the educational system is that these tests have been used for decades to establish criteria for students to access higher public education. Consequently, students will not have the possibility of entering higher public education if they do not reach the score established in these tests by public universities. That score determines if students are accepted or rejected by the university's academic offer. In this sense, the educational systems face the uncertainty of reaching the average results in the State tests and international standardized tests because it seems that achieving a distinguished quota in the ranking of the institutions is more important than the quality of education itself. However, the results obtained in standardized tests do not mirror the quality and development of cognitive skills that students have acquired throughout an academic period. The reality of education in Colombia and Latin America differs from the mechanisms, resources, training, and other conditions for which these tests are designed. What is more worrying is that such tests are not structured for the diversity of students with special abilities have in their training process environment.

Keywords

Saber Pro test; higher education; Standardized tests.

Resumen

El artículo presenta un análisis reflexivo en torno a la adopción de las pruebas de Estado, como un mecanismo de clasificación; clasificación que puede entenderse desde varias aristas. En primer lugar, las instituciones educativas, son llamadas a cumplir con ciertos estándares de calidad, emanados por organismos internacionales, quienes profesan el desarrollo del proceso educativo en entornos perfectos, es decir dejan de lado las condiciones reales y las dificultades de accesibilidad a recursos de la gran mayoría de los países subdesarrollados en los cuales se aplican dichas pruebas. En segundo lugar, y lo más neurálgico para el sistema educativo, es que las pruebas de Estado, han sido utilizadas por mucho tiempo para establecer criterios de ingreso y acceso a la educación pública superior. En consecuencia, los estudiantes que no logran alcanzar el nivel de exigencia y puntuación establecido por las universidades públicas, para ser admitido en los programas de su oferta académica, no

tendrán la posibilidad de acceder a la formación superior. En este sentido, los sistemas educativos, se encuentran con la incertidumbre de alcanzar los resultados promedio en las pruebas de Estado y pruebas estandarizadas internacionales, para lograr acceder a un cupo honorable en el ranking de clasificación de las instituciones con mejores niveles de calidad educativa. Sin embargo, los resultados que se obtienen en las pruebas estandarizadas, no son realmente el reflejo de la calidad y el desarrollo de competencias cognitivas que los estudiantes han adquirido a lo largo de un periodo académico, pues la realidad de la educación en Colombia y en general de América Latina, difiere mucho de los mecanismos, recursos, capacitación y demás condiciones para las que son diseñadas estas pruebas, y lo que es más preocupante aún, no se encuentran diseñadas para la particularidad y diversidad de capacidades especiales que tienen los estudiantes en un ambiente común de su proceso formativo.

Palabras clave

Pruebas Saber Pro; Educación Superior; Test estandarizados.

Introducción

In education, as well as in many areas of social and cultural life, nothing is definitive. Educational institutions at all levels, whether elementary, middle, or higher, need to transform themselves while the demands of society change. However, many academic events discuss the quality and relevance of evaluation instruments. Teachers and students are constantly involved in the uncertainty of evaluation and its impact on the formative development of students who approve or fail tests.

Thus, the discussion and academic events have established the need to integrate different approaches in which the rule of measuring the quality of education provided in Colombia and in other countries that make up Latin America must be established. Meanwhile, new, and numerous classification criteria continue to be organized so that universities and institutions of elementary and secondary education continue to fulfil with parameters set up by international government organizations, to access a celebratory place in the rankings of quality and coverage classification released by the national government.

Consequently, the results obtained from the state tests should be the starting point to describe the shortcomings and differences in opportunities to access educational resources. In other words, the pedagogical exercise must encourage students to develop cognitive, behavioral, procedural, technological, axiological skills among others. Thus, skills that are fundamental for coexistence in a diverse society with the capacity to adapt. However, far from becoming so, the state tests are used by educational institutions as a mechanism that guarantees acceptance or denial of university education. Especially, Saber PRO Tests are the balance that measures specific skills acquired in a professional program. Thus, the panorama is increasingly complex and dark for teachers, coordinators, students, and the academic community in higher education since the classification they want to access does not reflect the reality of the pedagogical and methodological processes developed to fulfill their missionary objective.

This document presents a discussion scenario full of uncertainty to analyze the impact of the results obtained in standardized tests on students, teachers, and institutions that champion the training process, development, and assessment carried out inside their classrooms. Also, this paper addresses the need to reflect on the role played by state tests and their involvement in universities.

The principal outcome of this document is to address the standardized tests applied in institutions in Colombia today called SABER, their purpose and challenge in higher education, and understanding of the structure and orientation that the Ministry of Education has for its application and monitoring.

The university and state tests

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Colombia, as in most Latin American and Caribbean countries, are subject to continuous evaluation through government systems. The assessment porpoise determines the education quality seen in the students' academic performance through standardized tests. It constitutes a fundamental element for classifying universities with more recognition and status and their alumni's skills and competencies in the different areas and disciplines of HEIs offer.

Consequently, analyzing the results obtained from standardized tests come to mean predictions of the future performance of alumni, as well as valuable information in the detection of the strengths and weaknesses of the curricula of academic

programs. Therefore, quality educational processes lead to the identification of appropriation of knowledge. Knowledge is the most crucial indicator of the development of a country generated through the training and education of its citizens. But, for such knowledge to improve over time, it is critical to measure and control it (Rivera et al., 2021).

Chernikova et al. (2020) argues that higher education students require training for their future profession, and their professional competencies should include a range of complex skills. Thus, the government of Colombia and the publication of Law 1324 of 2009 and Decree 3963 also from the same year established that the presentation of the State Examinations of the Quality for Higher Education, now called Saber Pro Tests, is compulsory to graduate at the undergraduate level. Therefore, this exam is aimed at students who have passed 75% of the credits of their respective university training programs (ICFES, 2021).

Since large-scale assessment or standardized test is taken by numerous participants, it constitutes the base of international, national, departmental, or regional level exams (Martínez-Rizo, 2012). The main objective of standardized test is to evaluate the educational quality taught in institutions, that means it is the same whether context we are talking.

Likewise, a continuous evaluation of the methodological and curricular processes that feed the statistical systems and provide an overview of the academic quality and future projections of students in their field of occupation is made.

The results of the standardized tests taken by many students, who hope to meet the criteria to qualify for their professional future, have become the object of special attention to determine educational reforms. These academic changes or educative improvements happen in the public and private sectors. Consequently, these evaluations seek to provide a basis for comparison of student and school outcomes; in other words, they seek to report on the average learning situation of students of a certain level by comparing these with the objectives or standards to be achieved at the level of the educational system (Martínez-Rizo, 2009).

STANDARDIZED TESTS AND THEIR PURPOSE

International standardized tests are benchmarking by international agencies and organizations used as standardized measuring instruments, applied in sev-

eral countries together, selecting groups or degrees of similar students (Sánchez, 2020). They aim to see that students' participation in this type of test will allow the identification of relevant information regarding cognitive and procedural competencies in different areas of knowledge and factors of the learning process that affect quality.

One of the tests that the Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES) carries out an evaluation of higher education, formerly known as ECAES and now called Saber PRO, compares Colombian performance with other countries since 2006. Among the benefits of applying a model test, Saber Pro has a high external validity because it measures educational performance in different places, compares them, and establishes drivers and trends, among others (Ávila and Linares, 2019). Thus, the actors of the educational process in Colombia, especially the Ministry of National Education, based on the results of each institution, make decisions, and establish new guidelines in favor of continuous improvement in search of quality and coverage with equity throughout the territory.

Standardized assessment has managed, over the years, to become one of the most used evaluations to know the general state of an educational system for its accountability (Díaz, 2021). The importance of the results obtained in the Saber PRO Tests, applied by most universities in Colombia, is that it has become a requirement to enter higher education, and it is the base to formulate educational strategies that support the improvement of the averages in each module evaluated. Therefore, the articulation between the processes developed within the classrooms and the curricular gear proposed in each program is achieved with the visible results publicly that, in most cases, leave in question the quality conditions offered in each institution.

Similarly, Cabrera, Valdés, and Flores (2018) argue that it is not enough to identify which content students have difficulties with. Instead, it is necessary to investigate why these difficulties occur so that their causes can be established and on them support the actions that contribute to success. That is, the evaluation applied on a large scale in the country's universities can have a more significant role in their results since its in-depth analysis could detect the construct and methodological elements that could benefit the educational improvement in all the formative aspects of a alumni.

According to Colombian legislation, in Decree 3963 of 2009, one of the objectives of the Saber PRO Tests is to check the degree of development of students' skills, and second to produce value-added indicators and serve as a source of information for the construction of indicators for evaluating the quality of higher education programs and institutions (MEN, 2009). In addition, it has been identified that the Saber PRO Tests constitute a reference in the measurement for the university at a local and national level, in such a way that it positions higher education institutions in the national ranking that determines the quality of the best universities in the country (Poveda-Pineda DF, Cifuentes-Medina JE, and Chacón-Benavides, 2021).

Saber PRO testing challenges

The Saber PRO higher education quality exam based on Law 1324 and Decree 3963 of 2009 is mandatory to obtain an undergraduate diploma. However, this score has no consequences for the student. Students who submit it must be enrolled and have passed at least 75% of the academic credits (Contreras, Maya, and Sarria, 2020). When mentioning that the results do not have any issue for students, it is a requirement only to complete higher studies. On the other hand, at an institutional level, they are of utmost importance since the main objective of these tests is to evaluate the skills developed in some components. For the Ministry of Education of Colombia and universities, it is an essential tool to work on the improvement of quality since they offer a diagnosis that serves as a guide for designing policies and improvement plans at the institutional level (Díaz-Reyes et al. 2021).

It is worth mentioning that the results in the Saber Pro tests can be considered an essential starting point to achieve university accreditation. Although, there is no established scale on which academic counterparts are based to establish an ideal performance. This performance should be at a desired level by academic peers. However, the ICFES has published the structure of the Saber PRO test (Figure 1), in which the parts of the evaluated modules are clearly identified. The general and specific content to be considered are immersed in establishing a rank to the educational quality of higher education.

Ayala-García (2015) affirms that the results in standardized external tests show the effort that the Ministry of Education has made to improve the high inequality between educational levels. This fact has been the reason to work on improving coverage. It shows how important these results are in the development and recognition of universities.

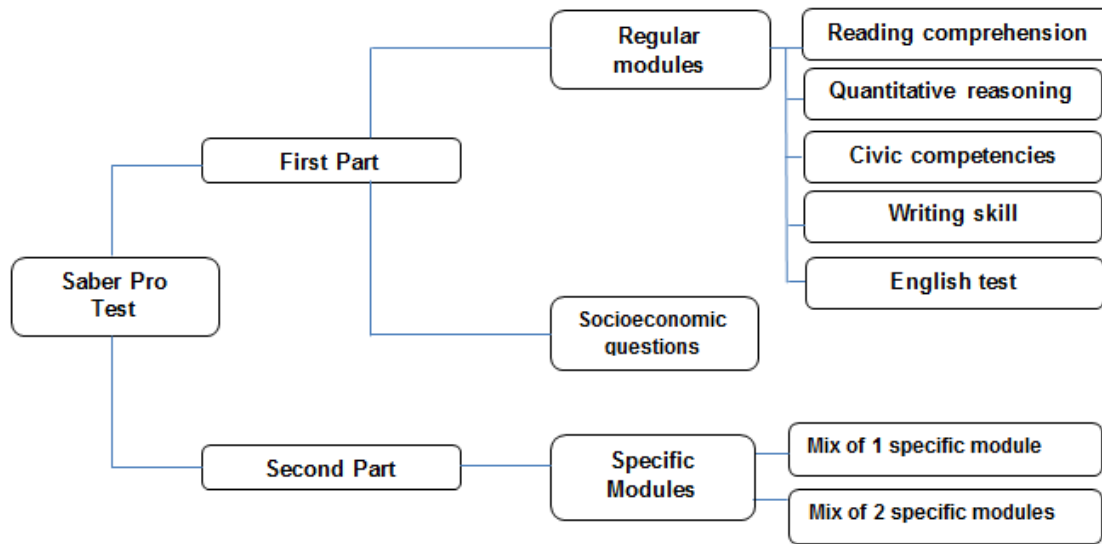


Figure 1. Structure of Saber PRO

Source: ICFES (2021) Orientation guide generic competence modules Saber PRO.

In Colombia, education is defined as a continuous process, personal, cultural, social formation based on the integral conception of the people, their dignity, rights and duties (James, Almagro and Hinstroza, 2020). Based on that definition, it would be necessary to strengthen institutional strategies that lead to increased self-evaluation so establishing effective improvement plans could be more accurate. Also, there is a need to adapt educational realities so that quality is the element around which the mission and administrative processes that govern educational institutions at all levels can revolve. We are talking about universities as responsible for delivering to society professionals with specific skills as agents of change that contribute to the economic growth and integral progress for the common good.

The dynamics of the universities should look up to establish internal evaluation programs centered on pedagogy, didactics, physical infrastructure, and technology at the service of teaching and learning. Universities should address the permanent updating of models and methodologies for the evaluation of interdisciplinary knowledge of each professional profile. Now, Saber PRO Tests main challenge can be summarized as being a benchmark for evaluating universities in its missionary

axis. Evaluation is recognized as a tool for educational institutions to observe and analyze their processes and results more systematically, which implies having relevant information about their actions, difficulties, and achievements, all of this, to make decisions for the improvement of educational quality and equity (Alvarado and Núñez, 2018).

In this regard, Patra (2022) mentions that the evaluation involves several different processes in which students, teachers and authorities of the institution interact for the development of the learning environment, and that the information it yields refers to a particular educational process. However, the results of the educative evaluation applied to large groups, such as saber PRO ends-up being used to measure predetermined standards globally to the educational institution. Characteristics such as accessibility to information, pedagogical resources and educational scenarios are very diverse and sometimes complex. Far from the reality of measurement, those aspects are considered as input at the national level. Indeed, results are used to determine the quality, validity, reliability, and employability of alumni.

Murphy (2022) states that most of today's national tests and assessment programs are very similar to the intelligence tests we experience as children. Evaluators do little to improve and encourage better teaching and learning in institutions. In contrast, national and school-based assessments have remained distinct enterprises for Caribbean countries, and these problems remain potential rather than evident. That is, people responsible for designing tests such as Saber Pro should direct their concern on the validity and bias of this test, or it will continue to measure and yield educational and evaluation practices that are not very accurate in Latin American countries. Environments, resources, and methodologies are very distant from those evaluated in places with high cultural and educational development that frame the quality standards of higher education at the international level.

In conclusion, some students are not the best at taking tests, so they perform poorly on them. However, it is the responsibility of students to obtain the scores they deem necessary (Qassimi and Wade, 2021). Even so, students and teachers should be punished for the Saber Pro results since the purpose of this test it to show the inequality of an educational model of access to information with different conditions in each corner of the Colombian territory. Skills acquired by students in their training model are bad when the measurement does not show the particularity of the educational context in which skills were developed.

Conclusions

Standardized tests were designed to measure the quality of education provided in educational institutions. Indeed, what would be expected is that results will impact the continuous improvement of curricula, the updating of teaching and learning methodologies and the identification of strengths and weaknesses to enable the development of necessary skills which favors the professional performance of university alumni. However, beyond strengthening educational processes and providing tools to improve their quality, tests have become an instrument used to rank educational institutions by the national government. And this process does not reflect the conditions and efforts developed inside the classrooms by teachers, students, and managers.

In Colombia, since 2006, the results of the Saber PRO Tests have been used as an essential input to define the quality offered in higher education institutions. In this sense, the results are used as a reference point to analyze material elements of content and discipline, as well as elements that concern the methodology and pedagogical processes developed in the training process given within a certain period. It is expected from results to contribute enhancing the professional capacities and disciplinary competences that university alumni will be able to perform in their professional life.

For university students, taking Saber PRO test constitutes a requirement to obtain their professional diploma. It is not needed to have a minimum approval score that could interfere in students' graduation. For universities the score obtained is very important since this is a decisive factor, when it comes having a good recognition of High-Quality programs by the Ministry of National Education. So, while the management and teaching community make the best effort to find strategies to improve the tests results, most students only take the test to fulfill in with the requirement criteria to obtain their diploma. They do not know the implications their scores have on their universities.

The challenge of the Saber Pro results tests is increasing for universities in Colombia since tests are a window of observation and measurement by the Ministry of National Education. Although there are many efforts to improve the gaps and difficulties that affect the development of training processes aimed at professionals from different disciplines, the truth is that continuous evaluation is now part of the institutional culture that permeates all the processes developed inside the classroom and outside it.

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