National Systems of Quality Assurance for
Higher Education
in Ibero-America

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4

National Systems of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Ibero-America

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Contents

List of Tables and Figures

INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of a study carried out within the framework of the Cooperation Agreement between the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI) and the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU) of Argentina, signed by Mariano Jabonero, Secretary-General of the OEI, and Néstor Pan, president of CONEAU, in March 2019. This agreement has given rise to a collaborative process which strengthened ties between both organizations. Different possibilities of collaboration were explored until agreeing on a research line that would give an account about quality assurance of higher education in Ibero-America.

Along this path, a multidisciplinary team was built by the Ibero-American Observatory of Science, Technology and Society (OCTS) of OEI and the Directorate of Development, Planning, and International Relations of CONEAU. Within the dynamics of exchange and cooperation, different activities were conducted. Members of the CONEAU technical team participated in activities in the INDICES Network (Ibero-American Network of Higher Education Indicators); and OCTS professionals were engaged in teaching activities at CONEAU Training School. Joint participation at international congresses about higher education was also undertaken.

The drive to address these crucial issues from a research perspective has given rise to this report which is underpinned by two factors. First, the growing importance of quality assurance (QA) at a global level; and, secondly, the scarce literature on quality assurance systems in the Ibero-American region. Although information about higher education or evaluation and accreditation may be found for some systems, the development of a comprehensive report giving an account of QA models in a descriptive and comparative way is hard to find in the area.

The experiences and reflections collected show that in the countries of the region there is no precise knowledge on how the concept of quality assurance is approached in other countries, or on how evaluation and accreditation processes are conducted in neighboring countries. An endogenous logic prevails, in which the procedures that are known and on which one reflects are those of the context where they are applied. This perception prevents from having a wide, comparative, and critical look at the system itself.

This report has been developed under a framework of ongoing studies that the Ibero-

American Observatory of Science, Technology and Society is conducting. In the publication "Higher Education Panorama in Ibero-America - 2019 Edition", an appendix called "Focus and perspectives of quality assurance in higher education: an approach to the analysis dimensions" was included. This present report goes deeper into the concepts that publication began to address.

The INDICES Network has also conducted significant work on higher education indicators. In the 2019 report drawn up by Ana García de Fanelli (CONICET principal researcher at the Centre for State and Society Studies - CEDES), a detailed description of indicators of higher education in Latin America was conducted. The study is organized into nine sections: economic, demographic, and educational context; enrollment; geographic coverage; new entrant students; graduates; internationalization of student enrollment; academic staff; financing; research and development.

In the present report, we focus on describing and comparing the quality assurance systems of higher education in the countries that make up the Ibero-American region. To achieve this aim, several in-depth interviews to the main sources of information were conducted in every country within the region: presidents, directors or important officials of agencies or bodies responsible for quality assurance in higher education. It is important to highlight that all of them were related to the national agency or entities in charge of quality assurance in their countries. The voice of the main actors, the literature review and the official information disseminated by every system have allowed to draw up an accurate quality assurance regional map and facilitated a thorough description. These activities were carried out by a research team, made up of members of the technical team of CONEAU´s Directorate of Development, Planning, and International Relations. This team developed the research design, and the data collection tools. Team members also undertook in-depth interviews, processed, and analyzed the information collected, and drafted the final report.

This report is structured to guide the reader through a journey beginning with a description of the several quality assurance bodies in the different systems and countries, then it makes a comparative analysis of the evaluation aspects involved in the systems, and finally it concludes with a thorough inquiry about the different attributes of the evaluation processes addressed by this research.

The search, processing, and dissemination of information is the focus of OCTS. Its major

task is to get evidence about the capacities, challenges, and opportunities for science and technology in Ibero-American countries, as well as about their abilities and skills for scientific research, technological development, and innovation. As regards CONEAU, it has recently created the Research and Statistics area with the purpose of producing and publishing information about the agency background and its present operation in issues about the quality assurance of higher education. The synergy accomplished by both institutions has given rise to this report, which seeks to provide the academic community with a descriptive map of the quality assurance systems in Ibero-America.

QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN IBERO-AMERICA

In 2015, the 70th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as Global Goals. The fourth of these strategic objectives aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". This means that it is no longer enough to think about an education that reaches all sectors, but that the pedagogical proposal must also include the concept of quality. This fact can be seen as a confirmation of those quality assurance systems that were already consolidated or that began to consolidate, and also as a boost to the achievement of quality assurance systems in countries and regions where this issue has not yet been addressed or has been dealt with in a preliminary way.

This global concern for the quality of education is added to the changes produced in the national systems of higher education, especially in Ibero-America. There has been an expansion in enrollment, mainly of lower income sectors and adults, who have different interests and needs. This was accompanied by diversification and privatization; and by new types of higher education institutions (HEIs),[1] new programmes, new teaching modalities, and, fundamentally, by an accelerated growth of the private sector in this field. All these changes have brought to the forefront the concepts of quality and quality assurance that in the region have not been considered as a strategic axis.

The concepts of quality and quality assurance related to higher education are homogeneous across different regions in the world. There are several regional networks or agencies that have built glossaries and elaborated definitions of these two concepts[2]:
"QUALITY: *is the degree to which a continuum of differentiating features inherent in higher education fulfils a given need or expectation. In the broad sense, it refers to the exemplary performance of an institution of higher education. It is an asset of an institution or programme that meets the standards preset by an accreditation agency or body. In order to be properly*

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[1] [1]In this report we will refer to higher education institutions (HEIs) because some systems do not make a clear distinction between university and non-university institutions. In some cases, when we mention "universities," we will exclusively refer to universities and the programmes that are offered in them.
[2] RIACES International Glossary of Quality Evaluation and Accreditation.   www.riaces.org

measured, it usually involves the evaluation of teaching, learning, management, and results. Each component can be measured by its quality, and the whole assumes the overall quality. There is no universal agreement on what quality is, but it is increasingly being measured in relation to two aspects:(a) the quality training received at a particular study programme, and (b) the institutional capacity for enhancing that training - and the planning for change - as well as the operationalization of strategies for institutional change. Education is not merely about the acquisition of knowledge, but is also about tools, multicultural competence, technologies, critical thinking, and the ability to learn (after graduation) new things. The assessment of graduates' attributes is not only related to their training in core subjects, but also in complementary subjects, and in their motivation for research, innovation, and community service. These are some of the factors most used by accreditation agencies or bodies."

"QUALITY ASSURANCE: actions undertaken by educational institutions in order to guarantee effective quality management. Quality assurance is also applicable to accrediting agencies or bodies. "

There are general coincidences regarding these definitions, however, differences of approaches and perspectives in the application and implementation of these categories may be found. Different models and systems of quality assurance in higher education have emerged out of these dissimilarities. The application of this concept has given rise to a complex web of philosophical views, ideologies, economic interest, and management approaches on education.

Non-visible diversity

As we reviewed the application of quality assurance systems throughout the world, we have found different models, with similar purposes, work methodologies, and even "normative principles". They specifically address a unified approach of principles and criteria for quality assurance. As an example, we can mention the Bologna declaration signed by 29 European countries in 1999, which, among other strategic decisions, decided to build up a network and promote joint work to ensure the quality of higher education in Europe. The convergence of national educational systems was based on several factors: comprehensive and comparable degree and credit systems in all countries, teacher cooperation, international student mobility, and process transformation.

This does not mean that evaluation and accreditation are the same in France as in Spain, in the United Kingdom or in Germany. The French agency HCÉRES[3] does not have the same scope as its Spanish counterpart ANECA[4] or QAA[5] in the United Kingdom. However, there is a shared common understanding and a regulatory framework that allows to perceive a regional integration of public policies for higher education and quality assurance.

This is harder to visualize in Ibero-American countries. At first sight, most of the countries seem to have a similar model for quality assurance: they use processes that include self-evaluation, external evaluation, and the decision of the evaluating body. However, coming closer to the different country systems, we find that some countries carry out institutional evaluation and others institutional accreditation; we see that some of them accredit all undergraduate programmes and others only some; there are countries with voluntary accreditation and others with mandatory processes; and countries in which the cost of the processes must be afforded by universities and others in which the State supports them.

In the American countries of the region, every country has developed its own evaluation and accreditation system according to its dynamics, history, traditions, higher education system, and legislation. This has given rise to a notion we have called "non-visible diversity": a variety of national experiences in evaluation and accreditation

Within the framework of this report, a series of dimensions and sub-dimensions have been defined for a better understanding of the diversity of models and quality assurance systems in Ibero-America. These dimensions allow to have a descriptive and comparative view of the systems.

- Dimensions and sub-dimensions are as follows:
- Bodies involved in quality assurance

o Evaluation purposes the quality assurance systems

Institutions as evaluation objects

o *Ex-post* institutional evaluation

o E*x-ante* institutional evaluation

Undergraduate programmes

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[3] www.hceres.fr

[4] www.aneca.es

[5] www.qaa.ac.uk

- o Graduate programmes
- o Internal quality assurance systems
- o Student learning
- o Teaching academic staff
- o Professional practice qualification
- o Private evaluation agencies
- o Institutional systems of distance education
- Attributes of evaluation processes:
  - o Peer evaluation
  - o Mandatory or voluntary evaluations
  - o Outcomes and periodicity of processes
  - o Criteria and standards
  - o Evaluation and accreditation process costs for institutions
  - o Nature of quality assurance models

The interrelations across these dimensions create the different approaches to evaluation of the countries that make up the Ibero-American region. In the following sections, every dimension is described, delving into the conceptual analysis and the country positioning in its HEIs model of quality assurance.

QUALITY ASSURANCE BODIES

Quality assurance in Ibero-America implies the participation of different entities, governmental and non-governmental, in the definition of norms, criteria, proposals, as well as in planning and making decisions regarding the quality of higher education. The legal framework that defines the quality guidelines for higher education in different countries determines that different institutions, agencies, and sectors of the educational and scientific community integrate quality assurance systems. Thus, these systems involve government bodies (ministries, councils, higher education directorates), HEIs (by their representatives from councils or assemblies and/or through sectors of the university community) and agencies. The notion of agency stands for the body that specifically addresses quality assurance in higher education and is in charge of institutional evaluation tasks, accreditation of undergraduate and graduate programmes, authorization of new institutions, evaluation of student performance or authorization of accrediting agencies. These agencies can also be called commissions, councils, systems, boards, institutes, or committees.

We have found out that most of the Ibero-American countries have at least one national agency, which either depends on governments or is a decentralized and autonomous body,[6] which has been established pursuant to laws and norms that regulate the evaluation and accreditation processes. These agencies comply with various functions concerning quality assurance. Most of them emerged in the region between the 1990s and the early years of the 21st century.

There is also a group of countries with new agencies, such as Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic.[7]

Brazil's quality assurance system has its origin in a 2004 law, which created the National System of Higher Education Evaluation (by its Portuguese initials, SINAES). However, the system involves CAPES, an institution accrediting graduate programmes which dates back to 1951, and INEP, an organization created in 1937, devoted to different educational issues related to

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[6] In Guatemala, no quality evaluation agency has been established. In Uruguay, the agency is scheduled to start operating soon; in Bolivia, an agency has been created by law, but it is not currently in operation yet.

[7] In Andorra, the agency has also been recently created (2016), but as it is a territory in the European area, it has undergone previous quality assurance processes within the framework of the European area of higher education. At present, Andorra has two universities.

different levels, which will undertake quality accreditation processes according to regulatory framework for QA system.**8**

National agencies are, with a few exceptions, comprehensive agencies, in the sense that they fulfill different functions: they evaluate higher education institutions, programmes of different discipline fields and educational levels, and in some cases, they also evaluate student learning, teacher training colleges, or accrediting private agencies or entities. To a greater or lesser extent, comprehensive agencies cover two or more of these functions about quality assurance.[9]

Private agencies have also been created for quality accreditation purposes in the region. They can be for profit or non-for-profit organizations. In Mexico, these agencies oversee the voluntary programme accreditation according to disciplinary fields. Thus, several discipline-based bodies have established in the country and have been evaluated as accrediting agencies by the Accreditation Council for Higher Education (COPAES), a body that operates in agreement with the Ministry of Public Education. In Chile, before the new higher education law passed in 2018, private accrediting agencies were in charge of the voluntary programme accreditation processes, but at present, the national agency is the only authorized body responsible for compulsory accreditation.

In some countries, particularly in Central America, there are regional private agencies that accredit institutions and programmes of some universities, such as the Central American Agency for the Accreditation of Architecture and Engineering Programmes (ACAAI), whose mission is to accredit academic programmes in Central America. However, these programmes are not recognized by the States. In general, in the Ibero-American region, the national agencies are the central bodies of the higher education quality assurance systems.[10]

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[8]INEP is the technical body, responsible for carrying out external evaluations of institutions, for the accreditation of undergraduate programmes and for students 'assessment, but it is the Ministry of Education, as a political body, which makes the decisions on quality accreditation. INEP also participates in the CONAES, the collegiate body that coordinates and oversees the quality assurance system.

[9] COPAES in Mexico is an exception because only accredits agencies, and SINAES, in Costa Rica that so far it inly accredits undergraduate and graduate programmes.

[10] In Spain there are regional agencies responsible for the Higher education quality assurance in the Autonomous Communities. The national Agency ANECA, apart from operating in its national capacity, it also operates as an agency for those communities not having their own body, or that having it, it is not registered in the European Quality Agencies Register (EQAR).

TABLE 1

National agencies for the evaluation and accreditation of higher education

COUNTRY	AGENCY
ANDORRA	Agencia de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior D'Andorra (AQUA)
ARGENTINA	Comisión Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria (CONEAU)
BOLIVIA	Proyecto de Agencia Plurinacional de Evaluación y Acreditación de la Educación Superior Universitaria (APEAESU)
BRAZIL	Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP) Fundação Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES) **Fundação**
CHILE	Comisión Nacional de Acreditación (CNA)
COLOMBIA	Consejo Nacional de Acreditación (CNA) Comisión Nacional Intersectorial de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior (CONACES)
COSTA RICA	Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior (SINAES)
CUBA	Junta de Acreditación Nacional (JAN)
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC	Agencia Dominicana para el Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior (ADACES)
ECUADOR	Consejo de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior (CACES)
EL SALVADOR	Comisión de Acreditación d e la Calidad de la Educación Superior (CdA)
HONDURAS	Sistema Hondureño de Acreditación de la Calidad de la Educación Superior (SHACES)
MEXICO	Agencias privadas disciplinares autorizadas por el Consejo para la Acreditación de la Educación Superior (COPAES) Comités Interinstitucionales para la Evaluación de la Educación Superior (CIEES) Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT)
NICARAGUA	Consejo Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación (CNEA)
PANAMA	Consejo Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación de la Educación Superior Universitaria de Panam (CONEAUPA)
PARAGUAY	Agencia Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación de la Educación Superior (ANEAES)
PERU	Sistema Nacional de Evaluación, Acreditación y Certificación de la calidad Educativa (SINEACE) Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Superior Universitaria (SUNEDU)
PORTUGAL	Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior (A3ES)
SPAIN	Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA)
URUGUAY	Instituto Nacional de Acreditación y Evaluación de la Educación Terciaria (INAEET) Not in operation

A common feature of these agencies is that their members come from the academic community. They have an academic and professional background widely recognized in the academic world and expertise in some disciplinary fields. The regulatory frameworks define what organism, institution or social sector appoint their members, the period of their appointment and the renewal policies. In addition, they have different levels of autonomy with respect to the executive branch.

In some systems, the higher education institutions themselves, through their councils or assemblies, appoint academic members and experienced professionals to join the agencies. On the other hand, there are agencies that have representatives from some universities, such as ANECA, which has among its members a student and a union representative from the teaching and research staff. Likewise, the Chilean and Andorran agencies, as well as the coordination bodies for the quality assurance systems in Ecuador and Brazil have student representatives.

There are also countries in which other governmental bodies or decentralized entities related to science and technology designate representatives in their agencies, such as the Ministries of Production and Planning in Ecuador; or in Chile, where the CNA appoints a representative for the National Commission for Scientific and Technological Research.

Agencies are related to the ministries of education of the countries or to the government bodies in charge of higher education, such as vice ministries or higher education directorates. In some of them, it is the minister, vice minister or director in charge of the higher education area who is part of the agency, as in Spain; in Cuba, the Minister of Higher Education can participate in the agency, but cannot either veto or revoke any of its decision. In other cases, the ministries or government agencies in charge of higher education appoint some of the members, as in Argentina, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay, and Paraguay. In the last-mentioned country, the Minister presides over the agency. This is also the case of Brazil, with the particularity that the ministry appoints three members for CONAES, which functions as a collegiate body for coordination and supervision of SINAES, whose mission is to provide guidance on general aspects of higher education. However, it does not carry out the evaluation and accreditation processes, which are in charge of INEP and CAPES, bodies that depend on the ministry itself. In Chile, the agency does not have representatives from the Ministry, but it participates in the Quality Assurance System that is made up of the agency, the Ministry

Undersecretariat of Higher Education, the Superintendency of Higher Education and the National Council of Education. In Colombia, the Ministry of Education does not appoint representatives for the agency, whose members are selected through competitive public processes undertaken by the National Council of Higher Education.

Regarding the entities that appoint members for the agencies, there are also countries in which it is the parliament or congress that nominates their members or endorses their appointment. In Argentina, the legislative chambers appoint half of the members of CONEAU. In Chile, the president of the Republic appoints six members with the agreement of three fifths of the Senate; and in Andorra, one member of the agency is the president of the legislative commission in charge of higher education.

Some agencies in the region have been evaluated by international organizations or committees, such as CONEAU (Argentina), CNA (Chile), CAN (Colombia), SINEAES (Costa Rica), and ANEAES (Paraguay). CONEAU in Argentina was evaluated in 2007 by the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) and in 2015, by a committee of international experts ; CNA in Chile was certified by the International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAAHE) in 2017; CNA in Colombia was evaluated by INQAAHE twice, the second time in 2018; SINAES in Costa Rica was evaluated in 2008 by the Central American Accreditation Council (CCA) and in 2010 and 2019 by INQAAHE; ANEAES in Paraguay was evaluated by the Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES) in 2019. In the case of agencies of the European area, all of them were evaluated institutionally by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and were registered at the European Register for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (EQAR). The evaluation process is conducted periodically every five years.

A particular case is that of the Central American Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CCA), a second-level accreditation agency in charge of giving international validity to the accreditation of the quality of higher education in Central American countries. It is an official body, created by the seven states: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize. Currently, its headquarters are located at the University of Panama. It is financed through universities, ministries of education and professional university associations. It also promotes quality improvement processes from different perspectives through agreements with organizations, such as ANECA and HCÉRES, and carries out

institutional accreditation processes at an international level, especially in those countries that have not strengthened their national quality assurance systems yet.

At the regional or global level, agencies in different countries are grouped into networks. The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) is a world-wide association of above 300 organizations. At the regional level, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) represents the quality assurance organizations in Europe; Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), in the Asia-Pacific region; and the Ibero-American System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (SIACES) in Ibero-America, which is made-up of only national agencies; and RIACES, which brings together national and private organizations.

It should also be mentioned the regional accreditation system for university programmes, ARCU-SUR, established in 2008. It was preceded by the Experimental Accreditation Mechanism (MEXA), implemented between 2002-2006. The quality of undergraduate programmes accredited by this system was mutually recognized by MERCOSUR Members and Associated States.[11] ARCO-SUR implementation is in charge of the National Accreditation Agencies, comprising the Network of National Accreditation Agencies (RANA), which agrees on the call dates, keeps the bank of evaluators updated, and coordinates the advisory commissions in charge of preparing the "Documents on criteria" for every undergraduate programme. Accreditation is voluntary and can be requested by the officially recognized institutions that have graduates in different disciplinary fields and are authorized to grant degrees in accordance with the legal regulations of each country.[12]

As mentioned, QA systems are developed through an institutional framework in which agencies interact with other bodies that oversee quality assurance. It should be highlighted that this framework reflects the diversity of Ibero-America. Thus, ministries participate in different ways in quality assurance by appointing members for the agencies, but also establishing criteria and standards, regulations, and procedures for evaluation processes. They may also define the degree programmes that must be accredited and, in some countries, such as Colombia, they

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[11] The Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) is a regional integration process, initially established by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, and joined by Venezuela (suspended in 2017 as a State Party) and Bolivia, in the process of accession. It has established agreements with South American countries, granting them in some cases the status of Associated States, such as Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Guyana y Suriname.
[12] See http://arcusul.mec.gov.br/index.php/es/

make accreditation decisions about institutions and programmes. Nevertheless, in these cases the agency´s recommendations have a binding character.

In some systems, the ministries decide on these aspects in agreement with councils, as in Argentina, where the agency decides on accreditation, but the Council of Universities, made up of university rectors, agrees with the Ministry of Education on accreditation standards; in Spain, accreditation resolutions are made, based on the agency's reports, by the Council of Universities, which comprises university rectors and some members of the Ministry of Education.

Another meaningful role played by ministries about quality assurance is to authorize or give licenses to new higher education institutions. In spite that authorization generally depends on some of the powers of the State, in some countries, agencies evaluate the institutional project, and the State´s decision about the creation of new higher education institutions is based on the information provided by them.

EVALUATION PURPOSES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS

Quality assurance brings to the forefront the purpose of evaluation: what do systems evaluate? What do they evaluate to guarantee a minimum quality level to enhance institutions and programmes or certify levels of excellence?

Taking a closer look at the Ibero-America QA systems, a pattern of diversity arises. However, it may be concluded that beyond their differences, the Ibero-American systems evaluate and/or accredit: a) university higher education institutions; b) private university higher education institutions *(ex-ante)*; that is, projects to create new universities are evaluated for authorization to operate; c) undergraduate programmes offered by university institutions; and d) graduate programmes offered by university institutions.

In some specific cases, which may not be generalized in the Ibero-American systems, there are systems that evaluate and/or accredit: e) the internal quality assurance systems of university centres; f) student learning; g) teaching staff of higher university education institutions; h) professional qualifications; i) approval for the operation of private agencies to accredit the quality of higher education in their countries; and j) the evaluation of the institutional systems of distance education.

University institutions as evaluation objects

E*x-post* institutional evaluation

The quality assurance systems have the aim to evaluate the higher education institutions, not only a set of study programmes that are offered in them. The institution as an object of evaluation is quite common in the region because it is the function mostly performed by the systems within the Ibero-American countries, except for Costa Rica, Bolivia, and Uruguay. The two last-mentioned countries do not have agencies yet, so quality assurance is limited to undergraduate programme accreditation by the ARCU-SUR regional system. In other countries, this function is new, such as in Paraguay, which approved its institutional evaluation mechanism

in 2019, after a process that included an experimental mechanism, or in Nicaragua and Honduras, two countries that are just beginning their quality assurance processes. Their agencies have just begun their activities of institutional evaluation.

In Ibero-America there are different institutional evaluation *approaches* and *institutional models* adopted by countries. They are more remarkably different than those noticed in the field of programme accreditation. There are countries with a focus on *institutional evaluation* for improvement, such as Argentina; and others, on institutional accreditation and results-oriented, based on the fulfillment of criteria and/or standards that institutions must achieve. Nonetheless, even in the latter group, diversity prevails, and you can find systems in which accreditation provides a seal of quality to institutions, and some which undergo restrictions or regulatory consequences due to process outcomes.

TABLE 2

General guidelines for institutional evaluation/accreditation

COUNTRY	GENERAL OUTLINE
ANDORRA	Institutional evaluation within a legal framework (recently created agency). Actions aimed at strengthening the internal quality assurance systems of institutions.
ARGENTINA	Mandatory institutional evaluation. University institutions must undertake self-evaluation processes that are complemented by external evaluation every six years. Evaluation of institutional systems of distance education.
BOLIVIA	The country does not have institutional evaluation or accreditation. In 2000, it accredited fot one year the quality of private higher education institutions.
BRAZIL	Mandatory institutional accreditation.
CHILE	Mandatory institutional accreditation.
COLOMBIA	Voluntary institutional accreditation.
COSTA RICA	The country does not accredit institutions.
CUBA	Voluntary institutional evaluation with a result that grants the category of qualified, certified or of excellence.
ECUADOR	Mandatory institutional accreditation.
EL SALVADOR	The country is planning to implement mandatory institutional accreditation.
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC	The recently established agency is expected to conduct a voluntary institutional evaluation.
GUATEMALA	The country does not have institutional evaluation or accreditation.
HONDURAS	It has recently started with institutional accreditation. Although it is mandatory, only some institutions have applied for institutional accreditation.
MEXICO	Voluntary institutional accreditation.
NICARAGUA	It has recently started mandatory institutional accreditation. It is expected that the National Assembly may order the closure of institutions failing to meet the minimum quality standards.
PANAM	Mandatory institutional accreditation for institutions after eight years of operation. It is voluntary for those which have not met that deadline.

COUNTRY	GENERAL OUTLINE
PARAGUAY	Voluntary institutional evaluation and accreditation based on a framework approved in 2019.
PERU	Compulsory licensing to guarantee minimum quality, in charge of an entity created for this purpose. Voluntary institutional accreditation is undertaken by the agency (in the process of restructuring and review of the evaluation processes)
PORTUGAL	Mandatory institutional accreditation. Voluntary certification of internal quality assurance systems
SPAIN	Voluntary institutional accreditation of university centres.[13]Certification of internal quality assurance systems.
URUGUAY	Although the agency is not yet under operation, it is expected to carry out voluntary accreditation of university and non-university higher education institutions. It is analyzed that the agency, which is not yet operational, carries out voluntary accreditation of university and non-university higher education institutions.

In the region, the notion of institutional accreditation prevails through different processes, with the exception of Argentina, which carries out institutional evaluation processes; Andorra, where institutional evaluation is provided by law; and Cuba, where "institutional evaluation" means a process ending up with a result.

Institutional evaluation, unlike accreditation processes, do not conclude with a result. Its focus is only on institutional enhancement. In any case, all systems define, together with institutional evaluation or accreditation, *mechanisms for institutional improvement*. Systems with institutional accreditation, which define minimum quality standards, create mechanisms so that institutions that do not meet the quality threshold at a call may apply for accreditation again after a period. Thus, systems consider improvement as an institutional component, either systems with institutional evaluation, searching for improvement; or those with accreditation processes that are oriented to results.

The other aspect that differentiates the models of institutional evaluation/ accreditation is whether it is *mandatory or voluntary*. In general, the systems in which the process is *mandatory* establish more restrictions regarding the outcomes than those where it is voluntary, and where the evaluation/accreditation is more linked to an evaluation for improvement or for a quality seal. In Chile, where Institutional accreditation is mandatory, outcomes bring about consequences ranging from limitations to the exercise of the university autonomy to the closure

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[13]In Spain, institutional accreditation of centres (university departments or schools) is undertaken. In addition, accreditation can also encompass private university centres affiliated to a public or private university. This affiliation allows them to offer official degrees, with the approval of the State .

of the institution, when it does not meet the minimum level of quality established by institutional standards. Thus, a university institution that accredits at a basic level cannot open new study programmes or enroll new students. Besides, it can only be accredited with this low level only twice, because at the third time it must accredit at an intermediate or higher level to continue operating. In Portugal, institutional accreditation is mandatory and institutions that get a negative result must stop their operation.

Mandatory institutional accreditation is sometimes also linked to the growth and expansion of higher education systems in the countries. This is the case of Ecuador, where the higher education law that establishes institutional accreditation as a quality assurance model may bring about the closure of university institutions that existed prior to the law, if they do not meet the minimum quality standards. In Nicaragua, where quality assurance system is recent, compulsory institutional accreditation is also a way to reorganize the higher education system. A particular case is that of Peru. At the beginning of the quality assurance policies, its agency had the function of undertaking voluntary institutional accreditation. Later, an organism was created to implement licensing processes to determine the compliance with minimum quality standards defined by the system. This process led to the closure of university institutions that did not meet the minimum criteria for re-licensing.

The case of Argentina is particular in that the institutional evaluation for improvement is mandatory but relies on the actions of the university institutions towards the strengthening and improvement of their institutional projects. It also acknowledges the system autonomy and diversity in the country. Institutional self-evaluation is combined with external evaluation processes that bring about a report with recommendations for improving the institutional quality.

A common aspect in all systems is that institutional evaluation or accreditation have two stages, the self-evaluation undertaken by the university itself and the external evaluation conducted by peer evaluators. However, stages may vary considerably regarding process focus, regulations, and time. The main differences between these processes lie in whether they are criteria-and-standard-oriented or have a project-focused perspective.

Ex-ante institutional evaluation

All countries have some mechanisms to grant *licenses to new private university institutions and safeguard public interest* during their first years of operation. In some systems, ex-ante evaluation, that is, a process that allows assessing the institution feasibility before it is put into operation, is within the scope of the agency functions. Therefore, agencies participate in this process by granting licenses to these new institutions. This does not mean that decisions depend on the agency because they rely on some state entity. However, agencies analyze project quality and feasibility.

In other systems, it is the executive branch or the legislative branch, through congresses or parliaments, that decide on the authorization of a new private higher education institution. In these cases, neither agencies nor any other entities related to quality assurance systems are involved in assessing or evaluating the projects for authorization. This characteristic will give shape to different regulations adopted by the quality assurance systems within the ex-ante institutional evaluation.

The table below shows in which countries agencies analyze the projects for the creation of new institutions and draw up reports which are then submitted for state oversight before the granting of licenses. Ex-ante evaluation is within the scope of Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay, Portugal, Colombia, and Peru[14] agencies.

TABLE 3

Agency participation in the licensing/authorization of new private HEIs

COUNTRY	Agency is involved in the licensing/authorization of new private HEIs	Agency is not involved in the licensing/authorization of new private HEIs
ANDORRA		Not defined by law
ARGENTINA	CONEAU	

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[14] In Peru, the body that has the function of licensing is not the same as the one that performs institutional and programme accreditation. It is an entity created by a new law which restructured the higher education system in the country. In Colombia, although CNA does not participate in the *ex-ante* evaluation, CONACES sets up discipline-based or sectoral Rooms that evaluate the projects of institutions and programmes, verifying the minimum quality requirements. For this purpose, it appoints academics from all over the country who are selected by public calls made by the Council of Higher University Education. They are in office for two years in and can be renewed in their positions.

COUNTRY	Agency is involved in the licensing/authorization of new private HEIs	Agency is not involved in the licensing/authorization of new private HEIs
BOLIVIA		Ministry of Education
BRAZIL	INEP	
CHILE		National Council of Education, an organism that together with the Agency is part of SINACES
COLOMBIA	CONACES	
COSTA RICA		National Council for Private University Higher Education
CUBA		Ministry of Higher Education, for public HEIs
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC		National Council of Higher Education, Science and Technology
ECUADOR	CACES	
EL SALVADOR		Ministry of Education
GUATEMALA		Council for Private Higher Education
HONDURAS		Council of Higher Education
MEXICO		Secretariat of Public Education / Secretariats of Education of the Federative Entities/Autonomous Universities.
NICARAGUA		National Council of Universities
PANAM	CONEAUPA	
PARAGUAY	ANEAES	
PERU	SUNEDU	
PORTUGAL	A3ES	
SPAIN		Parliaments of the autonomous communities
URUGUAY		Consultative Council for Private Tertiary Education
VENEZUELA		National Council of Universities

In addition, in the analysis of the conditions and feasibility for the operation of new private universities, there are differences across the systems. In some Ibero-American countries, this type of evaluation, which is mentioned in the laws that have brought about quality assurance systems, has played a major role in the systems regulation as a response to the accelerated growth of private higher education in the 1990s. In countries like Argentina, the

expansion of the private system based on the evaluation of the project feasibility and consistency has given rise to a regulated expansion since the creation of the agency. Therefore, new universities have met the established levels of quality. In other countries, institutional accreditation has responded to the need of regulating this expansion, such as the cases of Peru and Ecuador, where the implementation of this type of evaluation has brought about the closure of institutions that did not meet the required quality levels.

As regards the creation of public higher education institutions, in general parliaments/congresses, or some entities of the executive power, are involved both in the study of the project relevance, feasibility and/or consistency, or in the decision-making process.

Undergraduate programmes

According to the International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011, [15] educational programmes are classified in levels according to the degree they issue. Higher education comprises levels 5 (short-cycle tertiary education), 6 (bachelor's or equivalent levels), 7 (master's or equivalent levels) and 8 (doctoral or equivalent level). In binary educational systems, where higher education institutions are classified into two main subsectors based on the types of programmes they deliver, there are university and non-university subsystems. In general, non-university institutions have short cycle programmes that correspond to level 5 and universities issue degrees from levels 6 to 8. However, university systems in the region differ in the classification of their institutions and institutional arrangements, so comparison across programmes within their ISCED level is more appropriate than across higher education institutions. Nonetheless, beyond institutional arrangements, higher education systems classify their programmes in undergraduate education, which corresponds to ISCED level 6, and *graduate* education, equivalent to levels 7 and 8. It should be noted that there are countries, such as Peru, Cuba and Chile, which denominate level 6 as *pregrado* (Spanish for *pregrade* , that is, before the degree, but within the tertiary level) the level that corresponds to level 6; whilst others refer to them as *grado* (Spanish for undergraduate programmes).[16] In this report,

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[15] ISCED is the standard reference framework used to categorize and report internationally comparable educational statistics, which ensure the comparability of national educational systems that vary in curricula structure and content. ISCED 2011 was approved by the 36th UNESCO Conference in November 2011.
[16] UNESCO Institute for Statistics, International Standard Classification of Education, 2011, 2013.

in order to unify denominations, they are called undergraduate programmes as by ISCED level 6, which refers to study programmes in tertiary education or equivalent, which "are often designed to provide participants with intermediate academic and/or professional knowledge, skills and competencies, leading to a first degree or equivalent qualification. Programmes at this level are typically theoretically-based but may include practical components and are informed by state-of-the-art research and/or best professional practice".[17]

With the exception of some countries,[18] the accreditation of degree programmes is undertaken by agencies or commissions created for the sake of assuring the quality of higher education in the countries in the region and, as it will be dealt with in the next section, so is the accreditation of graduate programmes (ISCED 7 and/ or ISCED 8).

However, accreditation in higher education differs in approach and scope. There are accreditation processes in which all degree courses offered by higher education institutions are accredited, whilst others accredit programmes in certain disciplinary areas; in some countries accreditation is compulsory for all institutional programmes, but in others it is mandatory only for a set of discipline-based programmes. In some systems accreditation may be voluntary, in others the process may indicate a quality threshold and represents a seal of excellence. Therefore, degree programme accreditation differs in three main aspects that may ultimately differentiate the systems: the *scope* of the accreditation, that is, if all the degrees granted by universities are accredited, or only certain knowledge fields programmes; the *mandatory or optional* nature of accreditation; and accreditation *outcomes* as an indicator of compliance with established quality minimum threshold or accreditation with different levels of quality, from lower categories to those of excellence.

The combination of these aspects gives the different systems a particular distinction, which helps explain the diversity of ways that quality assurance has in the region. These different settings are also shown in some approaches that consider accreditation as a mechanism to guarantee minimum quality standards, or others that define different levels of

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[17] In some countries "pregrado" takes back to study programmes related to ISCED level 5, undergraduate level. Besides, as they are delivered in non-university HEIs, in some countries university also grant degrees corresponding to level 5.

[18] In Honduras, Nicaragua and Dominican Republic undergraduate programme accreditation is established by law but accreditation has not been implemented yet. In El Salvador and Guatemala education systems, there is no programme accreditation to ensure quality assurance.

quality and differentiate programmes in categories ranging from minimum to high levels of excellence.

Table 4
Accreditation of Undergraduate Programmes

COUNTRY	MANDATORY	VOLUNTARY
ANDORRA	Programmes granting official degrees for all disciplines	
ARGENTINA	Programmes defined of public interest by the Ministry of Education	
BOLIVIA		Programmes within the ARCU-SUR regional system
BRAZIL	Programmes defined by the Ministry of Education	
CHILE	Programmes related to health and pedagogy areas	The rest of the programmes
COLOMBIA		Programmes without distinction of disciplinary area
COSTA RICA		Programmes without distinction of disciplinary area
CUBA		Programmes without distinction of disciplinary area
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC		
ECUADOR	All programmes according to the law. Only those corresponding to the calls made have been accredited

realizadas | |
EL SALVADOR		
GUATEMALA		
HONDURAS		

MEXICO		Programmes in all disciplinary areas
NICARAGUA		
PANAM	For each university, at least two programmes of disciplines under accreditation of Voluntary for the rest of the disciplines discipline that is called for the the discipline that is called	Voluntary for the rest of programmes of disciplines under accreditation
PARAGUAY	Programmes in the areas of health, education, engineering, and all those that may endanger public health and personal property	
PERU	Health, education, and law programmes. The remaining programmes are under review because it is expected that they will have to license programmes.	The rest of the programmes
PORTUGAL	All programmes without distinction of disciplinary area	
SPAIN	Programmes that grant official degrees in all disciplines	
URUGUAY		Programmes through the ARCU-SUR regional system

Accreditation of undergraduate programmes is mandatory for all degrees in Portugal and for all official degrees in Spain and Andorra, where university own degrees are not evaluated for accreditation[19]. This is also the case in Ecuador, where it is prescribed by the higher education legal framework. However, some other calls for degree applications have been opened in the country for some degrees, but not all programmes have been accredited so far.

Accreditation of undergraduate programmes is also mandatory in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Paraguay, but only for some undergraduate programmes prescribed by the quality assurance systems. Ministries or other governing bodies of higher education define if a qualification accreditation is mandatory. Even though there is diversity across countries as to

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[19]   Official degrees are valid throughout the national territory, have state approval and are integrated into the catalogue of official university degrees. In addition, universities may establish study programmes leading to their own diplomas and degrees, which do not have the same status that legal provisions grant to official degrees.

criteria and eligible study degrees, programmes in general are related to the areas of health, education, applied sciences -such as engineering and architecture- and law.

In countries, such as Chile and Peru, only certain programmes have mandatory accreditation. In Panama there is also a combination of mandatory and voluntary accreditation, but from a different point of view because universities must accredit at least two programmes in a discipline and may submit others in the same field voluntarily.

In some countries, such as Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba and Mexico, universities can voluntarily submit any undergraduate programmes for accreditation to the national agency or authorized bodies, without the definition of certain disciplinary areas or programmes. Within the systems in which accreditation is voluntary, there are cases such as those of Costa Rica and Cuba in which, although accreditation is not mandatory, it has a wide, disciplinary scope and universities find incentives for programme accreditation. In Costa Rica, the law establishes that graduates of accredited programmes have the right to get a preferential hiring by the State and its institutions. In the case of Cuba, although it is voluntary, foreign students can only take accredited programmes, thus, this encourages institutions´ request for accreditation. In Bolivia and Uruguay, the accreditation of undergraduate programmes is also voluntary, but as it has been carried out so far through the ARCU-SUR system, undergraduate programmes defined by the Network of National Accreditation Agencies (RANA) have so far been accredited.

In addition, there are differences in the accreditation perspectives and outcomes. In some systems, programmes get a category according to the level in which they accredit. In Colombia, the accreditation aim is to achieve a high quality, considering that getting a high-quality seal contributes to programme enhancement. Programmes apply for accreditation voluntarily and obtain different accreditation terms according to outcomes. In Cuba, undergraduate programmes can get a category of excellence, certified or qualified, which gives them an accreditation term of nine, seven or five years, respectively.

Accreditation as a quality seal is common perspective of all programmes of the same degree in compulsory accreditation systems. In some systems, voluntary accreditation entails the idea of accreditation as a seal of quality, because accredited and non-accredited programmes coexist in universities granting the same degree. This is less common in systems where voluntary-based accreditation is coupled with incentives to apply for accreditation, or

in countries where a culture of quality has been established, thus encouraging the request for programme accreditation.

Graduate programmes

The accreditation of graduate programmes, which correspond to level 7 (master's degree, specialization or equivalent) and level 8 (doctoral degrees or equivalent) in ISCED classification, is one of the most typical functions of accreditation systems. However, there are some exceptions, such as those national agencies or commissions that do not have the authority to accredit graduate programmes, such as Bolivia, Uruguay, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic.[20]

In general, agencies carry out accreditation of graduate programmes, along with other quality assurance functions, such as institutional and undergraduate programme evaluation or accreditation. Nevertheless, there are countries like Brazil and Mexico that have other bodies in charge of graduate accreditation. In Brazil, CAPES is the only body that has the functions of quality assurance assessment and graduate programme evaluation.[21] In Mexico, CONACyT accredits only master's and doctoral programmes although the CIEES also accredit graduate programmes.

In graduate programmes, as well as in undergraduate degrees, differences lie in the compulsory or voluntary character of accreditation and in its scope, that is, if all programmes or only a few are accredited within the level. The type of programmes at the graduate level also varies across countries. In general, master's degrees,[22] (in some countries called master's or magister's) and doctoral programmes are granted. In some countries, there are specializations for health specialties and in others, such as in Argentina, specializations are graduate degrees in different disciplinary areas.

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[20] Universities may accredit their graduate programmes with foreign agencies, but it is not the role of national agencies. In Ecuador and Panama, the law establishes that graduate programmes must be accredited by the national agency, but the accreditation process at this level has not yet begun.

[21] CAPES has among its functions the monitoring and evaluation of graduate programmes in the country, the awarding of grants for the improvement of senior researchers; and the promotion of initial and continuing training of teachers for primary or elementary education in on-campus and distance education modalities.

[22] In the region, the word "maestría" (one of the Spanish words for master) prevails for the master's degree programmes. They correspond to level 7 of the ISCED classification. They are called "magister" in Chile and "máster" in the European countries in the region.

In general, countries where accreditation at the undergraduate level is mandatory for all or for some programmes, also have graduate programme compulsory accreditation, as in the case of the European countries, Argentina, and Brazil. In Chile, accreditation is compulsory only for doctoral programmes and in Paraguay, for medical specialties.

TABLE 5 Accreditation of graduate programmes

COUNTRY	MANDATORY	VOLUNTARY
ANDORRA	Official programmes: master`s and doctoral degrees	
ARGENTINA	All graduate programmes: specializations, master´s and doctoral degrees	
BOLIVIA		
BRAZIL	All graduate programmes: master´s and doctoral degrees	
CHILE	Doctoral degrees	Master´s degrees and health specialties (only holders of an accredited programme degree can work in the public sector)
COLOMBIA		Health specialties, master´s and doctoral degrees
COSTA RICA		Professional and academic master's degrees, and doctoral degrees
CUBA		Specializations, master´s and doctoral degrees (the Ministry may demand closure of a non-accredited programme)
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC		
ECUADOR	Accreditation for all graduate programmes is mandatory by law, but accreditation has not taken place yet.	
EL SALVADOR		
GUATEMALA		
HONDURAS		
MEXICO		Health specialties, master´s and doctoral degree programmes
NICARAGUA		
PANAM	Accreditation for all graduate programmes is mandatory by law, graduate programme accreditation but it has not yet been carried out.	
PARAGUAY	Health specialties	Master's degrees and doctoral programmes
PERU		Master's degrees and doctoral programmes (under review by the

PORTUGAL	All programmes: master´s and doctoral degree programmes	
SPAIN	Official programmes: master´s and doctoral degrees	
URUGUAY		

The accreditation of master´s and doctoral programmes is mandatory for all degrees in Portugal and for all official degrees in Spain and Andorra, where university own degree programmes are not evaluated for accreditation. In Argentina, Brazil, and Ecuador, the accreditation of master´s and doctoral programmes is mandatory. In Argentina and Ecuador, specialization programmes granted by university are also accredited.[23]

In Chile, accreditation is mandatory only for doctoral programmes and accreditation of master's degrees and health specialties is voluntary. [24] In Paraguay, health specialty accreditation is mandatory but the accreditation of master's and doctoral programmes is voluntary.

The accreditation of all graduate programmes, specializations, masters or doctoral programmes is voluntary in Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, and Peru. In these countries, undergraduate programme accreditation is also voluntary, except for Peru, where it is compulsory for a group of undergraduate programmes and voluntary for the rest.

Internal Quality Assurance Systems

In Spain and Portugal, agencies evaluate the Internal Quality Assurance Systems (SIGC) of university centres. Andorra has not yet initiated institutional evaluation processes, but it has started working with the two universities in its territory to strengthen their internal quality systems.

The criteria and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education (ESG) establish that universities must have a public quality assurance policy that is part of their strategic management, and that centres or universities must develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes that ensure the participation of the entire

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[23]In Argentina, graduate programmes of all disciplinary areas may be specializations, masters, and doctoral programmes. All of them must be accredited. Ecuador has specializations that must also be submitted to accreditation.

[24] In Chile, the accreditation for medical specialty programmes is voluntary, but health specialists who wish to work in the public sector and be part of the public registry of health providers, must be graduates from accredited programmes

institution. Within this framework, the Spanish and Portuguese agencies have developed programmes to encourage and promote the development and implementation of internal quality assurance systems within universities. Although it is not a mandatory certification, in both cases institutions are encouraged to design, implement, and evaluate their internal quality assurance systems with the agencies.

Although quality assurance always entails the development of internal mechanisms allowing institutions to carry out the evaluation and accreditation processes, only in the European cases agencies must certify these systems. They do so, based on criteria and guidelines defined in the European Higher Education Area.

Students´ learning

Although in most systems the object of evaluation is institutions and programmes, there are countries, such as Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, and Mexico that have exams to assess higher education students´ learning. Exam results contribute to establish the level of knowledge that students have attained and are considered as indicators of programme quality.

In Brazil, INEP administers a National Student Performance Exam (by its Portuguese acronym, ENADE), and its results is one of the quality indicators of programmes. The Ministry of Education defines the areas in which students must take the exam every year, at the proposal of the National Commission for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CONAES).

In Cuba, the agency administers an exam for students of the same programmes during accreditation. In Ecuador, an exam is also taken to students who are finishing their studies. This exam takes place during the process of programme accreditation and is coordinated with the governing body of the higher education public policy.

In Mexico, the National Centre for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CENEVAL) conducts an admission and exit exam for both undergraduate and graduate programmes. It also assesses the level of knowledge and skills of prospective students for undergraduate programmes or the level achieved by recent graduates. This exam is not mandatory, but every institution can establish it as a requirement for programme admission or graduation, or as an alternative for the submission of a thesis.

University teaching staff

In general, higher education systems have different mechanisms to assess teachers and researchers and promote them according to the categories established by the systems. In the Spanish case, this function is undertaken by ANECA, the national agency that evaluates the quality of higher education. This agency has the function of assessing teachers and researchers for promotion in different categories to apply for the positions of *Profesor titular de universidad* (Senior Lecturer) and *Catedrático de Universidad (*Professor). It also assesses doctors for the position of professor hired doctor, assistant professor doctor and private university professor. In addition, it carries out the evaluation of the research activity of university professors and personnel of the scientific ranks of the public research organizations of the General State Administration, for the purpose of assigning retribution complements**.** This accreditation is voluntary, but it is a requirement for teaching doctoral classes, direct theses or participate as a member of competitive exam boards, among other activities.

The Andorran agency also evaluates the academic staff, but with different aims. The agency conducts the evaluation of professional experience and merits when a professor does not have the minimum qualification required to teach at the university. To teach in master's degrees, the teaching staff must have a master's degree or higher, and to teach and / or lead research projects in doctoral programmes they must hold a doctoral degree. However, universities can hire professionals who do not meet these requirements but have proven experience in the workplace. This hiring requires prior accreditation by the agency, and it is the responsibility of every university to request this accreditation when it hires a professor who requires this certification for teaching.

Qualification for professional practice

Only in a few cases are agencies involved in the qualification for professional practice, an aspect that is generally undertaken by the universities themselves. In Ecuador, CACES has developed an exam and issued a certificate of professional qualification for professional practice in those study programmes that may pose a risk related to the public interest. It is an evaluation that aims to prove that professionals have adequate knowledge, experience and skills to perform a

specific job, and it is a requirement for the professional exercise in the country. This exam must be taken by those students who are in their last academic period in the country's HEIs and by professionals who have been granted their degree in another country. Those who fail the exam can take it in subsequent calls.

In Peru, SINEACE has among its functions to authorize entities that certify professional or labor competencies, based on standards or competencies indicators jointly developed by the productive, business, and academic sectors. Assessment for professional qualification purposes is voluntary, but mandatory for health and educational professionals. In some cases, the certifying entities are higher institutes, universities, professional associations, or other bodies that must be authorized by the agency to certify competencies.

Private evaluation agencies

Some national agencies have, among their functions, to evaluate, authorize and / or oversee private agencies that may operate in the country. The most characteristic case of an agency assuming these functions is that of COPAES in Mexico, whose exclusive task is to authorize the operation of private accrediting bodies that undertake voluntary programme accreditation. The evaluation carried out by COPAES is compulsory for the organizations because it enables them to operate. Each accrediting body has a discipline-based function.

This was also the case in Chile before the new higher education law, when private agencies fulfilled the function of the voluntary accreditation of programmes and the national agency was responsible for evaluating the agencies. As of the new law enactment in 2018, CNA does not fulfill this function and programme accreditation is the exclusive task of the national agency. The Nicaraguan agency, which has recently begun its operation, has among its roles the authorization and supervision of private agencies for accreditation of education quality.

In this regard, Argentina´s case is particular because the higher education law establishes that the national agency can rule on the development of new private agencies for institutional evaluation purposes, but this function is not currently in place, and CONEAU, the national agency, is the only body responsible for quality assurance of higher education.

Finally, in Peru SINEACE evaluates and supervises external evaluation entities that are in charge of carrying out the external evaluation of institutions or programmes. Institutions themselves choose an evaluating entity, which can be public or private, and which has been established only for the purpose of conducting the operational processes of the external evaluation for institutional or programme accreditation purposes. Both the criteria and procedures, as well as the accreditation decisions correspond to the national agency, which also guides the institutions during their self-evaluation process. Therefore, these entities are not accrediting agencies *sensu stricto*, because they are established only for the purpose of conducting the external evaluation processes of institutions and programmes.

Institutional systems of distance education

The growth of distance education in higher education has led some agencies to incorporate the evaluation and accreditation of programmes that are delivered with this modality. However, the evaluation of this pedagogical mode as a specific function of agencies for quality assurance in the Ibero-American region is not common.

In Argentina, CONEAU has included as one of its functions the evaluation of Institutional Distance Education Systems (By its Spanish initials, SIED). The Agency understands that university institutions must consolidate a set of processes, actions, standards, equipment, human assets, and teaching materials for the development of projects in distance education. This perspective is underpinned by the idea that the institutional dimension plays a central role for the development and strengthening of Distance Education programmes. Therefore, the Ministry of Education, in agreement with the University Council, has stated that, within the framework of the institutional evaluation, universities must submit their SIEDs to the Agency for evaluation, and to the Ministry of Education for validation. The institutional system validation is a requirement for the Ministry of Education to grant national validity to the degrees that university institutions grant within this modality. Thus, it is mandatory for the agency to evaluate the distance learning undergraduate and graduate programmes that must be accredited.

The expansion of distance learning undergraduate and graduate programmes in the case of Argentina has posed the question for the search of quality of distance education institutional

systems. Thus, it has given rise to a new object of evaluation within the quality assurance systems in the region as a mechanism to ensure the quality of university programmes.

ATTRIBUTES OF EVALUATION PROCESSES

Peer evaluation

National systems for quality assurance of higher education have in common the peer-review process for institutional or programme evaluation. Their bodies conduct these processes by appointing experts who analyze institutions or programmes. These experts are called peer evaluators and are one of the main actors in the evaluation processes.

The participation of peer-reviewers in the evaluation and accreditation processes is one of the criteria for the achievement of good practices in the systems and makes processes reliable for the educational community and for society at large. Hence, agencies have transparent mechanisms to select peer evaluators. One of their tasks is setting up a registry of experts' representative of the diversity and plurality of the academic communities. Then they must develop transparent procedures for peer selection. In this way, it is possible not only to guarantee peers´ suitability for the evaluation activities, but also to ensure the ethical outlines established in the regulations and to prevent conflicts of interest within the institution under evaluation. Besides, agencies must also develop instruments and activities to provide peers with technical assistance and training for the development of the evaluation activity.

Peer evaluators come from the academic and / or professional field, as well as from the management of higher education institutions. Their participation seeks to get a better understanding and a symmetric view of the system,[25] or of the discipline of the programmes under evaluation. Programme evaluation requires the selection of peers per discipline, who have a different profile from those who undertake the review of institutions.

In the evaluation processes, peers make up working groups, generally called committees, guaranteeing a plurality of views on the institution or programme. As a starting point, they analyze the institution self-evaluation report and participate in the external evaluation, verifying the compliance with the standards, in a joint work with the agency that has developed the evaluative criteria, instruments and activities.

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[25] In general, QA systems consider as principles of good practices, among others, the agency performance of their goals with autonomy, transparency and professionalism; conducting peer evaluations based on clear and specific public instruments and mechanisms; the development of external evaluations aimed at ongoing improvement; and the public disclosure of its policies and decisions. Likewise, it is conducive to good practices the respect that the agency must have for the autonomy and diversity of HEIs and for their programmes.

As mentioned, evaluation by peer-reviewers is one of the aspects that countries have in common in the region, because, even within the scope of the system diversity, countries that have developed quality systems have peer evaluators as a common feature.

Although it is not frequent, some systems appoint foreign experts for the accreditation committees under the perspective of obtaining an external view of the evaluated national system.

Mandatory or voluntary evaluations

As mentioned, the fact that evaluations or accreditations are mandatory or voluntary defines to a large extent the models of quality assurance in higher education.

Institutional evaluation and accreditation, and programme accreditation may be mandatory. For quality assurance systems, it is a means of guaranteeing the society that higher education institutions and their programmes meet the necessary quality criteria or standards defined by the system. In this sense, it also implies a quality threshold across institutions or programmes of the same kind, because it certifies that higher education institutions or their accredited programmes meet minimum quality standards.

The mandatory criterion in the region is more widespread for programmes than for higher education institutions in operation. In **Table 6**, we can see that some countries establish institutional accreditation as mandatory, such as Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Panama, and Portugal. [26] In these countries, the institutional accreditation outcomes have legal consequences that range from limitations for the exercise of the university autonomy, to the closure of an institution when it does not meet the minimum quality set by standards. Also, in Peru, a compulsory licensing process was implemented for institutions in operation. As mentioned in the mandatory institutional accreditation section, in some countries this condition regulates the expansion of private higher education, a widespread global and regional phenomenon that has grown since the 1990s.

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[26] In more recently created systems, such as the ones in Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, it is under consideration that agencies conduct the mandatory institutional accreditation. However, they are just beginning to fulfill this function and not all institutions have been accredited yet. In El Salvador, as it is expected that the system will carry out mandatory institutional accreditation.

Institutional evaluation is also mandatory in Argentina, but it is an evaluation process that does not have to comply with standards and whose objective is oriented to quality enhancement. It is worth mentioning that in this country, it is the *ex-ante* institutional evaluation that provides the regulatory function of the system. Its objective is to guarantee that new institutions meet the minimum quality standards prescribed for a university institution. To this purpose, the agency appoints experts to analyze the feasibility and consistency of the institutional project submitted to CONEAU. The agency´s recommendation to the Ministry of Education may result in the authorization or non-authorization of the new institution. The negative outcome is binding.

The voluntary form of the institutional evaluation or accreditation processes is more closely related to institutional enhancement, and, in the case of institutional accreditation, it is also oriented to a quality distinction.

TABLE 6

National QA systems by mandatory or voluntary institutional evaluation / accreditation

Mandatory Institutional Accreditation	Mandatory Institutional Evaluation	Voluntary Institutional/Accreditation/Evaluation	No Institutional Accreditation/Evaluation
CHILE	ARGENTINA	COLOMBIA	ANDORRA ***
BRAZIL		CUBA	BOLIVIA
ECUADOR		MEXICO	COSTA RICA
HONDURAS*		PARAGUAY	DOMINICAN REPUBLIC ***
NICARAGUA *		SPAIN	EL SALVADOR
PANAM			GUATEMALA
PERU **			URUGUAY ***
PORTUGAL			

*It has recently been implemented in Honduras and Nicaragua.
 ** Peru combines the compulsory licensing of IES in operation with voluntary accreditation. The latter is currently under review.
*** In Andorra, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay evaluation is planned on a voluntary basis, but institutional evaluation processes have not yet been carried out by the agencies, which have recently been put into operation in Andorra and the Dominican Republic, and are in the process of implementation in Uruguay.

FIGURE 1
Mandatory or voluntary institutional evaluation or accreditation by country

- Mandatory institutional evaluation
- Mandatory institutional accreditation
- Voluntary institutional accreditation / evaluation
- No accreditation / evaluation

It is evident that higher education evaluation is mandatory for *ex-ante* institutional evaluation, and all systems establish a set of criteria for licensing new private higher education institutions. These criteria must be fulfilled compulsorily for their operation. Yet there are differences across the criteria established for *ex-ante* evaluation and the bodies that make decisions upon the feasibility and consistency of new university projects prior to operation.

Table 7
National QA systems by mandatory or voluntary accreditation of undergraduate programmes

Mandatory for programmes without disciplinary distinction	Mandatory for programmes of certain disciplines	Mandatory for certain programmes and voluntary for the rest	Voluntary	Voluntary in the ARCU-SUR Regional System	No programme accreditation
ANDORRA *	ARGENTINA	CHILE	COLOMBIA	BOLIVIA	DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
PORTUGAL	BRAZIL	PANAM	COSTA RICA	URUGUAY	EL SALVADOR
SPAIN *	ECUADOR**	PERU	CUBA		GUATEMALA
	PARAGUAY		MEXICO		HONDURAS
					NICARAGUA

* Only for official programmes. Universities own degrees are not accredited.
** It is mandatory for all programmes by law, but as accreditation is ruled by calls, only those for which a call has been opened have so far been accredited

FIGURE 2
Mandatory or voluntary accreditation of undergraduate programmes by country

Mandatory for undergraduate programmes in all disciplines
Mandatory for undergraduate programmes in certain disciplines
Mandatory for some programmes and voluntary for the rest
Voluntary
Voluntary in the ARCU-SUR area
No accreditation of undergraduate programmes

No acreditan programas

Except for the European countries that establish that all undergraduate programmes must be accredited,[27] systems restrict the compulsory accreditation to certain undergraduate programmes, especially those related to health, education, applied sciences -such as engineering and architecture- and law, based on criteria related to safety, health and educational training. Their purpose is to guarantee that programmes comply with the quality standards of the accredited programmes that the system defines as necessary for society. This level of symmetry across the same type of programmes is combined with different degrees of differentiation across accredited programmes because some countries establish different categories of accreditation. In some of them, accreditation conveys the idea that programmes meet the minimum standards; in some others, it implies a level of excellence. In general, these categories also encompass different accreditation periods. Yet beyond these differences, they provide programmes with a common quality threshold. The definition of voluntary accreditation is an umbrella term under which university undergraduate programmes granting the same degree, accredited and non-accredited, are together; whilst under the systems of mandatory accreditation, a seal of quality is given to all programmes conferring the same degree.

The voluntary nature of accreditation implies that the HEIs themselves choose to undergo the process of enhancing their programmes through accreditation and that they are not constrained by any regulation. Thus, as mentioned, programmes of the same type can be differentiated in a country in terms of those meeting the established standards from those not going through accreditation processes. But beyond the voluntary nature of accreditation, in higher education systems in which a culture of quality is embedded, HEIs value these mechanisms for improvement and are also compelled by different factors to have their programmes accredited, in particular, those in the health area. It has been found out that in the countries where the systems are more consolidated, it is the students themselves and the society who consider positively that an institution or programme is accredited. On the other hand, accreditation also implies obtaining a quality seal which may lead universities to getting prestige, financing, or the possibility of benefits for their graduates.

Likewise, there are systems, such as those of Chile or Peru, which have mandatory accreditation for certain programmes and voluntary processes for non-mandatory areas. It is also the case of Panama, which has mandatory accreditation provided by law of at least two programmes by discipline per call. The remaining programmes granted by universities have voluntary accreditation.

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[27] In Spain and Andorra, all officially recognized programmes are accredited, but not the university own programmes delivered by higher education institutions. However, It should be stated that in Ecuador accreditation also is mandatory for all programmes by law, but as accreditation is carried out through calls, so far only those programmes corresponding to calls have been accredited.

Mandatory or voluntary accreditation processes also concern to the accreditation of graduate programmes. As shown in Figure 3, there are systems in the region with mandatory accreditation for all levels of graduate programmes in all disciplinary areas, mandatory accreditation for certain programmes according to their level - in general doctoral and medical specialization programmes- and voluntary accreditation. In some countries, agencies do not evaluate all graduate levels.

TABLE 8

National QA systems by mandatory or voluntary accreditation of graduate programmes

Mandatory for all levels	Mandatory for some leves and voluntary for others	Voluntary	No programme accreditation
ANDORRA *	CHILE	COLOMBIA	BOLIVIA
AEGENTINA	PARAGUAY	COSTA RICA	GUATEMALA
BRAZIL		CUBA	HONDURAS
ECUADOR		MEXICO	NICARAGUA
		PERU *	EL SALVADOR
SPAIN			NICARAGUA
PORTUGAL			DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
			PANAMA
			URUGUAY

- Under review

48

FIGURA 3

Mandatory or voluntary accreditation of graduate programmes by country

Process outcomes and accreditation periods

Some countries carry out evaluative processes for either institutional or programmes ending up in accreditation or non-accreditation decisions. Some other evaluation processes are not aimed at a result, but to enhancing quality. Such is the case of institutional evaluation in Argentina, where the external institutional evaluation is not carried out by standards and concludes with a report with recommendations for the institutional improvement.

The dominant evaluation model in the region is result-oriented, which also seeks to improve quality, but unlike the previous one, the result of accrediting or not accrediting involves two issues: on one hand, it makes explicit if the institution meets the system prescribed standards; on the other hand, a non-accreditation result has consequences for the operation of an institution or for the delivery of a programme. These implications are also defined by the

system regulations, ranging from the closure of the institution or programmes to a request, subject to a deadline, for adjustments to comply with a minimum of quality.

In general, the results-oriented accreditation of institutions and programmes ends up with a decision and a validity period. Thus, processes are not carried out only once but are reviewed within certain periods. In some systems, the validity period is uniform for all the institutions and programmes that are accredited, while, in others, periods are determined by the degree of compliance with criteria and / or defined quality standards or categories of the accreditation process, from a minimum level to that of excellence.

In some countries, such as Andorra and Mexico, once a programme has been accredited, there are no differences as to the period of validity, but rather it is uniform. In Mexico, the evaluation carried out by organizations authorized by COPAES, has as possible outcomes *accreditation or non-accreditation*. For accreditation, the validity period is five years.[28] Likewise, in Andorra, programme accreditation is mandatory for all official degrees. It is carried out before the programme is in operation and, in all cases, when six years have elapsed since accreditation, an *ex-post* evaluation is carried out for the renewal, amendment or extinction of degree programmes.

In general, countries apply different criteria to determine the accreditation validity periods, which vary between three to ten years. In these cases, the difference relies on accreditations with different periods depending on the university level of compliance with standards, total or partial, or deadlines associated to the categories of accreditation as a seal of quality, more linked to differentiating institutions and programmes. The accreditation for a maximum period, such as six years for undergraduate programmes in Argentina, means compliance with all the standards defined by the ministerial regulation for a certain programme, whilst a programme accredited for three years means that it has not achieved the expected quality level, but has submitted an improvement plan that can be fulfilled within a reasonable period of time. Study programmes which have not completed their academic period yet or do not have graduates also accredit for three years.

In Paraguay, the assessment of undergraduate programmes is based on assigning numerical values to some variables. Average scores are used for results. Programmes having

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[28] In this country, CIIES accreditation can be for 3 or 5 years, depending upon the level of compliance with standards.

weaknesses that can be amended may get a nine-month postponing period for adjustments. After this lapse they may or not be granted accreditation. The numerical result defines the accreditation term, which can be for four or six years. Likewise, in Honduras although the accreditation of undergraduate programmes has not been implemented yet, the accreditation period is expected to be three years if improvements are necessary, or five years if no weaknesses are detected. In Panama, the validity period for the accreditation of undergraduate programmes can be four, five or six years. The evaluation conducted by the CIEES in Mexico can have a timespan of three to five years, depending on the university level of compliance with the standards.

In countries with accreditation categories that determine the level of excellence, such as Chile, programme and institutional accreditation is mandatory and has a three-value levels of compliance with the standards: an accreditation of excellence for a period of six or seven years, advanced accreditation for four to five years, and basic accreditation for three years. Cuba has a similar system. Although accreditation is voluntary in the country, programmes and institutions can be awarded an accreditation category of excellence for nine years, certified, for seven years, or qualified for five years.

Periods are also determined according to other criteria, as in Brazil, where institutional accreditation may last for five, eight or ten years, according to whether it refers to a university, a college or a university centre. In the case of graduate programmes in Argentina, the accreditation term is related not only to the compliance with standards, but also to whether it is the first accreditation of the programme or it has participated in previous evaluations. Thus, the period for graduate programmes is six years if they meet the expected profile, provided they accredit at a second or subsequent time, and have graduates. If they accredit for the first time, even if they meet the expected profile, the term is three years; this is the same period if they accredit in subsequent times but have no graduates.

As mentioned, there are systems in which accreditation only implies a seal that certifies the quality of the institution and others in which the institutions undergo restrictions or regulatory consequences according to the result obtained in the accreditation, an aspect that is generally related to the mandatory nature of the process. For example, in Chile and Portugal institutional accreditation is mandatory and if a HEI despite the application of monitoring and improvement programmes, does not meet the minimum requirements for its operation, it is

not accredited and it is closed down. In Ecuador, non-accreditation for non-compliance with criteria and standards extends to institutions and programmes prescribed by law. When non-compliance with standards is noted, an improvement plan is drawn up and a follow up is carried out for up to three years. If the non-compliance persists, the closure of the institution or programme is requested. In the case of Cuba, in the institutional and undergraduate programme evaluation, there are no legal consequence if they are not accredited. But, in graduate programmes, closure may be required, despite being a voluntary accreditation.

Criteria and standards

A common feature of quality assurance systems is that quality evaluation is carried out through standards that institutions or programmes must meet to be accredited. Although there are some quality evaluations that are not guided by standards, such as the institutional evaluation in Argentina that is based on general criteria and whose objective is, as stated, oriented to quality enhancement, in general quality assurance entails an accreditation result. Results indicate that the institution or programme meets the standards that the national system for evaluating the quality of higher education has set to achieve accreditation.

Standards cover different aspects that make up for the quality of an institution or programme. These aspects refer to academic teaching staff, students learning, resources and equipment, among others; they imply a guideline, a set of criteria that guides the institutions and programmes for self-evaluation processes and the external evaluators who carry out the evaluation process. Therefore, the establishment of these standards is a central aspect of the assurance systems. The bodies and actors that define standards play a major role in processes requiring debate and the strengthening of these standards. In some countries it is the agencies themselves that define them, as in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama, and Peru. This is also the case of Chile, where they are defined by SINACES, the coordinating body in which the agency participates. In other countries, agencies only apply standards in the evaluation processes, which have been previously defined by other entities participating in quality assurance, such as in Brazil and Argentina. In the latter, if an undergraduate programme does not meet all the standards, but can improve its weaknesses, it is accredited for a period of three years after which it has to be reviewed again to check whether if it has fulfilled the improvement plans. If

standards are met, the accreditation is extended for the remaining three years. In some cases, such as in Paraguay, if an institution does not comply with the standards, it may amend its weaknesses and is given a period of nine months after which it must submit a new plan and accreditation may be granted to it.

We have also found general standards for institutions or programmes and standards for the disciplinary programme on evaluation. In systems where disciplinary fields are established for accreditation, such as the cases of Argentina, Chile and Paraguay, specific standards are defined for every field, based on disciplinary peculiarities.

Costs of evaluation and accreditation processes for institutions

The setting of quality assessment and accreditation agencies generally comprises a budget for their operation, prescribed by regulations. Budgets are financed by national funds, and covers the agency structure, its management, technical teams and operating expenses.

In external evaluation processes, those in which external peer evaluators are appointed by agencies, there are activities, such as meetings and site visits, which imply costs that in the region are financed, with very few exceptions, by higher education institutions. These costs refer to the payment of fees for peer evaluators and the mobility involved in carrying out external evaluations, both for institutional accreditation/ evaluation processes, and for programme accreditation. Only in Argentina, Cuba, and Spain, expenses are covered by the agency budgets. In these cases, all higher education institutions carry out their evaluation processes without paying fees. In Brazil and Paraguay, only private institutions must pay for the expenses arising from these processes.

In some countries, accreditation implies significant costs for the institutions because they must afford all the expenses that evaluation processes imply, as in Chile and Portugal, while, other countries pay lower rates that complement the expenditures made by the agencies to carry out these processes, as in Andorra, Peru and the Dominican Republic.

In some systems some evaluation processes expenses are shared by agencies and institutions, with a percent reduction or no cost expenses, to encourage institution participation. This is the case of Colombia, where institutions pay for the costs of evaluations

but do not have to afford expenses for high-quality institutional accreditation. It is understood that these high-quality accreditations promote processes of quality enhancement of institutions. In this respect, in Andorra, to get lower fees is a way to encourage programme changes and renewal.

Nature of quality assurance models

Quality assurance entails evaluative processes of different nature, which are recognized as auditing, evaluation, and accreditation approaches. In general, apart from the special features they have in every system, audit is understood as a process to ensure compliance with certain requirements and procedures; accreditation, as a process that involves comparing programme or institution performance with established standards, and evaluation as a comprehensive process that is not aimed at obtaining a result, but rather at guiding institutions and programmes for quality enhancement.

The study of the national systems in the region shows a wide scope of quality assurance approaches, with a major focus on institution and programme accreditation. Likewise, there are accreditation models of different nature in the region, some with a greater emphasis on quantitative and prescriptive aspects to verify compliance with indicators, showing that a certain level of quality has been reached; and others with emphasis on contextual settings, with a predominance of a qualitative view on evaluation processes, and on different dimensions and variables. In the region there are countries closer to one or other model, and some systems that may be considered mixed, with some pre-eminence of quantitative or qualitative aspects.

The systems in the region have common aspects regarding quality assurance, such as the accreditation of programmes by standards or through peer evaluation. Yet they have specific features given their history and the nature of their university systems. These aspects contribute to the system diversity and, consequently, to the difficulty in categorizing them; rather they are mixed models with a major emphasis on quantitative or qualitative accreditation or evaluation processes. They may have a prescriptive approach for accreditation or a multidimensional approach to establish compliance with standards.

In some countries, the accreditation process ensures that institutions or programmes meet the standards. This is undergone through processes including classifications and

quantitative levels, research bibliometric indicators, scales to assess teacher workload or number of laboratories in place. In these models, beyond the existence of variables or standards requiring a more in-depth analysis for putting them into perspective, the logic of the process is mainly quantitative.

Conversely, there are models with a predominantly qualitative view that, despite being standards-driven and demanding, for example, requirements about infrastructure facilities, or about the academic teaching background of a programme, their perspective is multidimensional. In their overall analysis, they try to capture the complexity of the institution, its disciplinary basis, its interaction with society, and other qualitative variables.

The diversity in the nature of these models is also linked to the different paths of institutional development of higher education systems, to the degree of autonomy of universities, to the modalities of expansion of higher education, and to the different cultures of higher education quality of the countries in the region.

CONCLUSIONS

The description of the national QA systems and the global view of the Ibero-American region provided by this report allows to envisage two trends. On the one hand, a path taken by the countries in the region to develop or strengthen quality assurance systems that comply with the principles of good practices. On the other hand, the development of a wide scope of higher education models, shaped by their histories and traditions, as well as different perspectives and state decisions about QA. All this contributes to the "non-visible diversity" already mentioned: a wide variety of national experiences in quality assessment and accreditation.

Regarding the bodies involved in quality assurance, most of the countries in the region have at least one national agency. These agencies are -with exceptions, as in the case of COPAES, the Mexican agency - integral bodies that fulfill different functions, such as the evaluation of institutions or the accreditation of programmes. The developing of these agencies is at the same time a feature that they have in common, and a characteristic that makes them different. It is a common trait because its members come from the academic community: they are persons with an academic and professional background, renowned scholars, and outstanding professionals. And the trait that differentiates them is the entity, body, agency, institution, or sector of society appointing them. In some cases, higher education institutions are the ones that nominate members, on other occasions, it is the government officials, professional associations and decentralized bodies of science and technology, representatives of congresses or parliaments, ministries of education, representatives of students, of unions or from business and productive sectors.

Regarding evaluation as an object of study and the answer to the question: what do systems evaluate? it may be stated that the Ibero-American systems have some points in common, but also significant differences. With a very few exceptions related to countries with more recent systems, all agencies or similar bodies accredit undergraduate programmes, although the difference lies in the scope of the accreditation, its character -mandatory or voluntary- and outcomes. Something similar takes place with accreditation at the graduate level, which, although less widespread than accreditation of undergraduate programmes, is one of the functions of several agencies. Differences are also related to the accreditation character

-mandatory or voluntary- and to whether all or only some programmes are accredited: specializations, master's, or doctoral degrees.

However, when we look at the institution as an object of evaluation, diversity prevails in the region. Most of the systems carry out institutional accreditations, but there are differences as to whether they are mandatory or voluntary and to the meaning of the processes. Some are oriented to the assurance of minimum quality levels and others grant categories that differentiate the quality of accredited HEIs. Moreover, in the case of Argentina, the institutional evaluation is not carried out by standards and does not conclude with an accreditation outcome. Its purpose is to encourage quality enhancement.

There is also diversity in the *ex-ante* institutional evaluation. Despite all countries implement some procedures to grant licensing for new HEIs, only in some nations this function is developed by an agency, which draws up the reports for decisions made by ministries or other state bodies. Thus, in some countries, evaluation processes are more oriented to the verification of conditions for operation, while in others they are more complex processes, driven by quality assurance.

Occasionally, some agencies are also responsible for the evaluation and / or accreditation of internal quality assurance systems, student learning, teaching staff, qualification for professional practice; and authorization of private agencies to accredit the quality of higher education in their countries.

Quality assurance of distance education systems deserves a special mention. The growth of this modality in higher education has posed challenges to the assurance systems to guarantee the quality of projects. Some agencies have incorporated distance education study programmes in their accreditation agenda. The uniqueness of the Argentine case is the incorporation of an assessment of the distance education system itself as a component of the institution prior to the institutional evaluation. This perspective considers that the strengthening of these systems at the institutional level is a condition for the development, consolidation, and improvement of educational projects within this modality. It is relevant that QA systems in the region consider the implementation or consolidation of evaluations that foster mechanisms to ensure the quality of distance education, an educational modality which has grown exponentially throughout the world.

In the description and analysis of the attributes of the evaluation processes, peer evaluation is a common feature in the region. The peer evaluator is one of the central actors in the evaluation processes. Accreditations based on standards and the establishment of effective periods for accredited programmes are also common within the region. Differences relate to the validity periods according to outcomes. There are validity periods varying from 3 three to 10 years. Regarding the standards – whether they are guidelines for institutions and programmes in the self-evaluation processes, or for external evaluators, differences across systems depend on what entity defines them. In some countries, it is the same agency that prescribes them, and in others they are set by other organizations or disciplinary fields.

In the region, processes that conclude with an outcome of accreditation or non-accreditation of institutions or programmes prevail; however, some are not outcome-oriented, have a more comprehensive approach, and seek for quality improvement. Likewise, there is diversity in the orientation of the accreditation outcomes. Some systems use a dichotomous scale of accreditation or non-accreditation as an indicator of compliance with quality assurance, and others distinguish different levels of quality, from lower categories to levels of excellence.

One of the attributes that largely defines a quality assurance model is its mandatory or voluntary nature. Obligation, apart from implying a guarantee, establishes the same thresholds for institutions or programmes of the same kind, enabling minimum quality standards. In the region, the mandatory criterion is more widespread for programmes than for institutions. Regarding the accreditation of undergraduate programmes, the compulsory or voluntary nature has many forms: it may be mandatory for all study programmes or for certain areas of knowledge; mandatory for certain disciplines and voluntary for the rest; or voluntary under ARCU-SUR mechanism. In addition, there are countries where programmes are not accredited.

In some countries, the evaluation and / or accreditation process implies significant costs for HEIs, in others, institutions pay for lower fees which are complemented by the expenditures made by agencies. Only three countries, Argentina, Cuba, and Spain, finance all the processes by the State budget. In Brazil and Paraguay, only private HEIs pay the expenses.

When analyzing the different countries of the region, we can see that Ibero-American systems of higher education have different historical developments and levels of consolidation. They have different paths of development linked to the origin of the systems, as well as different actions carried out to ensure and enhance the quality of their HEIs and programmes. Thus, there

is a set of countries with laws that regulate quality assurance and with agencies that have been in operation for more than ten years -and even more than twenty years in some cases- and another group with recent systems In Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic and Andorra, agencies are beginning their operation, whilst Bolivia and Uruguay do not have an agency in operation.

In the group of countries with consolidates systems, there are also differences in steadiness. There are systems that have strengthened quality assessment and accreditation processes over time and have developed consensus in higher education systems, such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Cuba in America, and Spain and Portugal in Europe. Other systems are in the way of implementing changes or are restructuring processes from the drafting or enactment of new laws. Such is the case of Chile, which has recently modified its higher education law, which will bring about deep changes in the system. Besides, Ecuador is also changing its regulations that include the modification of the name of its national agency (from CEAACES to CACES). Peru is restructuring the evaluation processes and its higher education system. Likewise, in Costa Rica and Mexico, bills are being discussed. and they will surely bring about changes in higher education and quality assurance.

It is important to highlight the relevance of the roles played by the State, HEIs, and agencies in every country and system. The State defines the strength to manage quality assurance of higher education in the country. If there is an agency in the country, the State assigns its purposes and functions, the voluntary or mandatory nature of accreditation, what is accredited and what is not, the cost of the processes for the institutions and the actors participating in the processes. These are decisions that only the State can make and are part of comprehensive public policies. University institutions, through knowledge production, citizens' education, and their response to societal needs, are the major pillars and drives for societal change and are primarily responsible for the quality of the education they provide. Finally, agencies are set up as a tool to enable a quality education system by implementing the actions and standards entrusted to them.

All the processes described in this report should be understood as steps for continuous improvement. Quality assurance must be thought of as a dynamic and ongoing process based on the consensus and participation of different stakeholders. This is only possible when a culture of quality is embedded in the higher education system of the different countries.

To think of a region with more homogeneous and consolidated systems, even within the framework of different national idiosyncrasies of higher education systems, implies promoting and consolidating national quality assurance systems. These systems should be based on good practices, and on trust among agencies. In this sense, a specific tool for this achievement is the recent constitution of the Ibero-American System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (SIACES), made up of national agencies from the region. This new system was created with the deep conviction that a higher education of quality is a necessary and fundamental condition for the development and integration of the countries. Consequently, it is important for the national systems to advance in strengthening and consolidating their mechanisms for ensuring the quality of higher education. To the extent that all the countries in the region have agencies or bodies addressing quality assurance, it will be possible to think of a more integrated, equitable and fairer region in terms of the quality of higher education.

Finally, it is probable that in this path for development, new issues will arise giving birth to new spaces for study and reflection. The multiple approaches and perspectives across the different dimensions analyzed in this study have brought the system diversity to the forefront. They allow to confirm that it is impossible to remove a model of quality assurance from its context; more precisely, that it cannot be separated from the state which regulates it, from the agency or agencies that make it possible, and from the history and configurations of higher education systems in the countries of the Ibero-American region.

NATIONAL SYSTEMS

OF QUALITY

CONEAU
Comisión Nacional de Evaluación y
Acreditación Universitaria

70 OEI
1949 - 2019

Andorra

Andorra is an independent principality in the European territory. At the time of this study, it had two universities, one public and a private one only for distance education programmes. In 2016, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education of Andorra (by its Catalan acronym, AQUA) was created by law. It is a public law institution whose purpose is to evaluate, accredit and certify the quality of higher education, according to the standards and guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The agency is autonomous, independent and has its own budget defined in the Parliament budget. It is made up of a director, a quality technician, and a steering committee. The steering committee is made up by the President of the General Council's Legislative Committee on Education, Research, Culture and Sport, who chairs the committee; the Vice president of the Legislative Committee on Education, Research, Culture and Sport, the Minister of Education and Higher Education; the director of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education's Department of Higher Education, Research and Study Grants, the university rectors; a student from one of the Andorran universities; the director of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Services of Andorra; an expert in quality processes in international higher education, currently the director of the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency; and the Director of the Agency, who is the Secretary to the Steering Committee.

The evaluation system in Andorra follows the guidelines of the European Higher Education Area as a frame of reference. In turn, the agency is affiliated with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Although AQUA began its operation by applying the ESG standards, it is now working together with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and the universities on the development of its own standards. The agency is carrying out the study programme accreditation of all disciplines for the bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, both from public and private universities. Accreditation must be compulsorily undertaken through AQUA. During the quality evaluation and accreditation process, international experts are appointed as evaluators. Students also participate in the process.

The Agency carries out *ex-ante* evaluations, that is, it deals with the accreditation of new study programmes that will be offered within a university setting. After six years, an *ex-post*

evaluation is performed and AQUA issues a report for the maintenance, modification, or extinction of a programme. If the programme has weaknesses, a series of modifications aimed at the renewal of the accreditation is submitted. In that case, the university must submit reports on the progress of the modifications requested and the agency carries out a follow-up procedure, either at the *ex-ante* or *ex-post* evaluation. In case the report is unfavourable, AQUA proposes the Ministry to withdraw the study programme. Whenever a degree programme seeks to modify its study plan, it must request the Agency for accreditation and its decision can be favourable or unfavourable. In all cases, the agency decisions are binding.

Although so far, the process has no costs, universities are expected to pay a small fee for *ex ante* evaluation, for both modifications and renewal. In the latter case, fees are lower to consolidate the accreditation of the programmes. As quality assurance must rely on public funds, these fees should have a symbolic value allowing the hiring of peer experts from other agencies.

The Higher Education Organization Law establishes that to teach at a Bachelor's or a Master's degree, teaching staff must have a Master's degree or higher; and to teach or conduct research projects in doctoral programmes, they must hold a doctoral degree. However, universities may hire professionals who do not meet these requirements, but who have accredited experience in the corresponding professional area. This agreement must be also accredited by AQUA. In such cases, universities are responsible for applying for this accreditation before starting the teaching activity.

Another task of AQUA established by law is institutional and research evaluation. However, as the agency has been created recently, these functions have not yet been developed. Although AQUA has an accrediting profile, it is also driven by quality enhancement and joint work. In this sense, it seeks to strengthen the internal quality assurance systems in the universities themselves and then foster institutional evaluation.

In its guiding function, AQUA carries out advisory tasks and has three lines of action: the annual study of job placement to improve qualifications (together with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, the University of Andorra, research centres and the Quality Agency of Catalonia), sustainable development, sustainability and quality -a project co-financed with the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) -

63

and students´ expectations, which addresses access, learning conditions, student profile, satisfaction with the university and expectations, in the Catalan-speaking universities network.

Until 2016, there was a department within the Ministry of Education and Higher Education that was in charge of quality assurance issues. The decision to create an agency followed the criteria of the European Higher Education Area in terms of governance and autonomy, to decide on quality criteria and thus orient higher education to Andorra´s particular social and labour demands.

Argentina

In Argentina, the Higher Education Law enacted in 1995 established that evaluation and accreditation is within the scope of the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (by its Spanish acronym, CONEAU) or of private entities set out for that purpose, duly recognized by the Ministry of Education. CONEAU is a decentralized body that operates under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education of the Nation. Its institutional mission is to ensure and enhance the quality of university programmes and institutions that operate in the Argentine university system through evaluation and accreditation processes. Pursuant to law, it has the functions of undertaking the institutional evaluation, as well as the accreditation of undergraduate programmes that are defined of public interest and of all graduate programmes.

CONEAU is made up of twelve members of renowned academic and scientific background, with experience in university management. They comply with their functions on their personal own behalf, with independence of criteria and not as representatives of any institution. Members are appointed by the National Executive Power at the proposal of the following entities: three members by the National Interuniversity Council (bCIN), which brings together the rectors of state-run university institutions; one member by the Rectors of Private Universities Council (CRUP); three, by the National Chamber of Deputies; three, by the National Senate; one, by the National Academy of Education; and one by the National Ministry of Education. The body comprises a technical team made up of university professionals from different disciplinary fields. Neither accreditation nor evaluation processes have a cost for institutions.

As mentioned, CONEAU has among its functions the evaluation of state-run or privately-run university institutions. Institutions must conduct a self-evaluation process that is completed with CONEAU external evaluation. Thus, the university institution development and characteristics are analysed within the framework of their institutional projects, missions, and objectives. Evaluation processes are conducted with the participation of peer reviewers and their aim is to foster quality enhancement projects within the institutions. External evaluation reports are public and make recommendations for improvement.

The Ministry of Education monitors private university institutions that have provisional authorization. This follow-up process is based on annual reports made by CONEAU to evaluate the institution academic levels and the degree of compliance with objectives and action plans.

After operating for six years, the institution can request its definitive recognition and achieve its full autonomy. The Ministry of Education´s decision is based on the report made up by CONEAU. For all these processes, CONEAU appoints experts to analyse if the project or the university institution meets the minimum quality requirements for operation.

In the case of national university institutions, established by a law of the National Congress, CONEAU analyses if the institutional project has a sound basis, whether it complies with the principles and regulations set forth by the Higher Education Law, and if it is feasible, and consistent. It is also analysed if the project is underpinned by an academic development plan including teaching, research, and extension activities, and if it is supported by adequate infrastructure for activity development.

CONEAU also takes part in the authorization of new private university institutions. While national universities are established by a law enacted by the National Congress, the Law of Higher Education establishes that the provisional authorization of private university institutions granted by the Executive Power requires previously a favourable report by CONEAU. An unfavourable decision is binding for authorization; however, a favourable decision is not binding on the ministry if it has reasonable grounds for rejecting the authorization.

The accreditation of programmes is carried out on the compliance with the standards approved by the Ministry of Education in agreement with the Council of Universities, a coordinating and consulting body of the university system, chaired by the Minister of Education or a representative, with a rank not lower than secretary. It is made up of representatives of public and private universities from CIN and CRUP, a representative from each Regional Planning Council for Higher Education (CPRES), who must be the rector of a university, and a representative of the Federal Council of Education. For the evaluation of undergraduate degrees, standards are defined by discipline; for graduate studies, there is a minimum set of common criteria encompassing all programmes.

The process of accreditation of undergraduate degrees is a necessary condition for the official recognition of degrees and for their national validity granted by the Ministry of Education. It is conducted through calls organized by the Ministry of Education in agreement with the Council of Universities. They jointly decide what undergraduate programmes are considered of public interest and require the establishment of accreditation standards. Accreditation is so far mandatory for the following undergraduate programmes: Medicine,

Engineering, Systems, Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine, Pharmacy and Biochemistry, Agronomy, Geology, Biological Sciences, Genetics, Chemistry, Architecture, Nursing, Psychology, Law and Accountancy. There are other undergraduate degree programmes that the Ministry has defined of public interest, but standards have not yet been approved for them, so the agency has not opened a call for their accreditation.

Accreditation periods may last for six years for programmes that meet the standards, three years for those that comply with the expected profile but have not completed a student cohort cycle yet, or for those that despite not having achieved the expected profile, have submitted improvement plans and may attain their goals within a reasonable time. Programmes that do not meet the established quality levels are not accredited.

Graduate degree accreditation is mandatory for all specialization, master's, and doctoral degrees. In this case, CONEAU conducts periodic calls for two types of processes differentiated by the status of the programmes: new study programmes or programmes under operation. New programmes are evaluated for the only purpose of getting a provisional official recognition enabling them to start academic activities. This recognition is granted under the condition that the programme request accreditation in the first call after starting its activities and expires if the institution does not request it. Programmes in operation obtain a six-year accreditation term if they meet the expected profile and accredit a second time or subsequently, provided they have graduates. If they comply with the profile and accredit for the first time or accredit in subsequent opportunities, and do not have graduates, their validity period is three years. They may also obtain a non-accreditation outcome.

For both undergraduate and graduate degrees, accreditation processes include a self-evaluation of the degree, a report of the external evaluation by the evaluating committee, and finally the decision of the National Commission. The Commission bases its decisions on the recommendations made by the evaluation committees.

The quality assurance system in Argentina has recently incorporated the evaluation of the Institutional System of Distance Education (SIED) for some university programmes under this modality. The Ministry of Education, in agreement with the Council of Universities, has defined that, within the framework of the institutional evaluation carried out by the agency, institutions must submit their SIED project to be evaluated by the agency and then validated by the Ministry. SIED comprises the processes, actions, standards, equipment, and human and

teaching resources enabling the development of programmes offered at distance education. In the future this evaluation will be developed within the framework of external evaluations. However, CONEAU has made calls for institutions with distance education programmes or that are planning to develop them, to submit their SIED projects for validation, because its validation is a necessary condition for the Ministry of Education to grant national validity to degrees with this modality. It is also a requirement that must be met for the agency to evaluate the distance education modality of undergraduate and graduate programmes that must be accredited on a mandatory basis.

Finally, CONEAU was evaluated in 2007 by the International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) of the Organization of the United Nations for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) and in 2015, by a Committee of international experts made up of the General Director of Higher University Education of Mexico, the Director of the National Agency for the Evaluation of Quality and Accreditation of Spain, and the President of the Council for Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education of Ecuador.

Bolivia

The Bolivian Education Law enacted in 2010 created the Plurinational Agency for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher University Education (by its Spanish acronym, APEAESU) and established that it would be a decentralized body and that its operation and financing would be regulated by a Supreme Decree. So far, this regulation has not been enacted and the agency is not operating yet. However, authorities are intending to gain levels of agreement regarding its financing and the conformation of its Board of Directors by public universities, private universities and State entities that oversee quality assurance.

Since 2008, the Ministry of Education has delegated over the Vice Ministry of Higher Education for Professional Training and the General Directorate of Higher University Education the assurance of higher education quality, and established by ministerial resolution the National Commission for Accreditation of University Programmes (CNACU). Its objective is to coordinate the evaluation processes for the accreditation and certification of educational quality within the framework of the ARCU-SUR System[29]; create and manage the registry for peer reviewers and observers; promote self-assessment processes; coordinate the development and monitoring of the external evaluation processes; and finally manage the implementation of the APEAESU created by Law.

CNACU is chaired by the Vice Minister of Higher Education and Professional Training (VESFP), and is made up of a representative of the General Directorate of Higher University Education; a representative of the Executive Committee of the Bolivian University (By its Spanish initials, CEUB) that brings together the country's public universities, one representative of the National Association of Private Universities (ANUP), a representative of the Vice Ministry of Science and Technology (VCyT) and a Secretary appointed by the Ministry of Education.

Neither accreditation guidelines nor national processes for quality assurance have been implemented yet. Degree programmes are voluntarily submitted to the call of the Network of

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[29] ARCU-SUR is the regional accreditation system of university programmes for the recognition of degrees in Mercosur and associated states. The system is in charge of the National Accreditation Agencies, which make up the Network of National Accreditation Agencies (Spanish RANA) and so far the undergraduate programmes of Agronomy, Architecture, six Engineering majors , Veterinary, Nursing, Medicine, Geology, Pharmacy, Economics, and Dentistry have been included in the accreditation processes. Its antecedent was MEXA, an accreditation mechanism implemented between 2002 and 2006.

National Accreditation Agencies (RANA) for the ARCU-SUR accreditation. Therefore, CNACU has called for peer evaluators through the Vice Ministry of Higher Education and Professional Training and the General Directorate of Higher University Education. CNACU has overseen the entire process that includes self-evaluation workshops for programmes in the accreditation process and peer training. These workshops are about quality criteria and guidelines for report drafting. CNACU must issue the accreditation or non-accreditation result and finally the Vice Minister informs the Minister of Education about the decision.

In the public university system, CEUB, through the Secretariat for Evaluation and Accreditation, carries out the processes of degree accreditation. CEUB is an executive body for the coordination, planning and programming of the activities of the Bolivian University, which brings together public universities in exercise of their autonomy. The CEUB accreditation system is not recognized by the State, it is only valid for the public system. Some private universities have been accredited with foreign agencies, particularly those from the United States and Chile, but these accreditations are not recognized by the State of Bolivia.

Although CEUB has outlined documents for institutional evaluation, no public institution has yet undergone this evaluation. In the case of private universities, between 2000 and 2006, the Ministry of Education carried out a process that was called *Universidad Plena* (Full University), which consisted of an institutional accreditation of private universities to guarantee that they met the minimum quality conditions. At that time, seven universities were closed, and some were given a period after which they had to carry out a second process to determine the compliance with minimum quality standards. After this process, no institutional evaluations have been conducted in the Bolivian universities.

Regarding graduate programmes, there are currently no provisions for their accreditation. Private universities must submit them to the Ministry, which performs a content review, verifies infrastructure and equipment, and issues a ministerial resolution for their operation. Public universities have full autonomy for the delivery of graduate courses. Universities develop their programmes which are approved by a resolution from the Rectorate.

Regarding the authorization for the operation of private universities, it is the Ministry of Education that applies the General University Bylaw that determines the conditions that must be met. The Ministry makes a documentary review and a visit. In a second stage, a review of the programmes is conducted to verify that they comply with the conditions. Finally, the

decision is made by the Council of Ministers through a Supreme Decree. For the creation of public universities, a Supreme Decree is issued. They may also be created by a Legislative Assembly Law. Public universities have autonomy to create programmes that can be put into operation once approved by the CEUB bodies.

Finally, CNACU has no state funding. University institutions pay for the operating expenses and fees for peer reviewers in accreditation processes.

Bolivia does not recognize either private university accreditations undertaken by foreign agencies or public university accreditations conducted by CEUB. In Bolivia, programme accreditation began with the Experimental Accreditation Mechanism (MEXA) in 2004. Since 2000 an institutional accreditation has been implemented for private universities only, in order to guarantee a minimum threshold of quality for their operation. Prior to the creation of CNACU, an *ad hoc* commission was established by the Vice Ministry of Higher Education, with representation from CEUB and ANUP, to undertake the accreditation process through MEXA. Quality assurance processes continued to develop with the regional accreditation of the ARCU-SUR System, whilst APEASU operation is still pending.

Brazil

In 2004 the National Higher Education Assessment System -Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Superior (SINAES-, was created by Law 10861 to evaluate higher education institutions, programmes, and student performance. Its mission was to enhance the quality of higher education throughout Brazil. Within the scope of the Ministry of Education, the Comissão Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Superior (CONAES)- National Commission for Assessment of Higher Education- was established. It is SINAES´ collegiate body for coordination and supervision, and its purpose is to set guidelines on general aspects of higher education. CONAES is made up of a representative of the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research "Anísio Teixeira" (INEP), one of the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES)- Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel- three of the Ministry of Education, a representative of the academic body of higher education institutions, one of the administrative technical body of higher education institutions, a student representative and five members elected by the Ministry of Education with experience in scientific, philosophical and artistic fields, and renowned expertise in higher education evaluation and management.

To define quality criteria and evaluation procedures, INEP works jointly with CONAES, which is the body that, among other purposes, recommends procedures and mechanisms for institutional, programme and student performance evaluation. INEP uses specific criteria matrices to assess health, law, teaching staff and engineering programmes, both for face-to-face and distant learning programmes. Programme accreditation is not requested by disciplines, so different disciplines can be evaluated at the same time.

The technical procedures for the external evaluation of higher education institutions, programmes, and student achievement is INEP´s responsibility. INEP was established as an autonomous body in 1937 and is linked to the Ministry of Education, which appoints its president. In turn, INEP´s president appoints the area directors and general coordinators. INEP conducts the evaluation processes and produces quality reports. The political authority for decision-making on evaluation and accreditation is the Ministry of Education. University institutions apply for institutional and programme accreditation to the Ministry, which after a prior assessment, submit their applications to INEP.

Similarly, the process for the creation of new private university institutions is initiated by the Ministry of Education, which sends university applications to INEP for evaluation. Based on INEP´s recommendation, the Ministry issues the authorization or non-authorization decision.

In Brazil, the institutional, undergraduate, and graduate programme accreditation requested by the Ministry of Education is mandatory. The evaluation and accreditation processes have no costs for public institutions. However, private institutions must pay a fee when they apply for accreditation with the Ministry. These funds are used to cover the peer reviewers´ expenses.

For the accreditation process, INEP appoints three experts on institutional accreditation and two on programme accreditation. The evaluation includes a visit to the institution, after which the INEP sends a report to the Ministry and to the evaluated institution. The Ministry can establish a protocol with defined conditions to be met, both for an institution and for a programme. If an institution or programme does not meet the initial requirements before applications are sent to INEP for evaluation, the Ministry may reject the request and the process is finished. Despite INEP´s report is essential, the Ministry may also consider the evaluation historical background of the institution or other inputs, which may play a role at decision-making.

The graduate programme accreditation is in charge of CAPES, which was created in 1951 with the aim of ensuring qualified personnel in adequate quantity and quality to satisfy the needs of public and private university initiatives. It also provides support to the Ministry of Education in national graduate policymaking. After various modifications, since 2007 CAPES has been governed by the rules and guidelines of the Federal Government, which are linked to the objectives of the National Education Plan (Portuguese initials PNE). CAPES main activities can be summarized as follows: graduate programme guidance and evaluation (particularly of Master's and Doctoral degrees), grants for training high level researchers, and the fostering of initial and ongoing training for primary education teachers at face-to-face and distance learning modalities.

For both institutions and programmes, evaluation outcomes can have five levels of compliance with the criteria: four or five are the levels of the highest compliance; three, stands for compliance with the minimum threshold; and a result of one or two non-compliance.

73

Institutional accreditation has a validity period for five, eight or ten years, according to whether it is a university, a college, or a university centre.

Finally, INEP also applies the National Student Performance Exam (ENADE), which assesses students of undergraduate programmes in relation to the study plan provided in the curricular guidelines, the development of competencies and skills necessary to deepen general and professional training, and students´ updated knowledge about the Brazilian and worldwide reality. To do this, it appoints specialists from different areas for advisory panels to build test items that may potentially be included in exams.

74

Chile

In Chile, the quality assurance of higher education is prescribed by Law 20129 enacted in 2018. This legislation establishes that the National System of Quality Assurance of Higher Education is integrated by the Ministry of Education (by its Spanish acronym, MINEDUC), through the Undersecretariat of Higher Education, the National Council of Education, the National Accreditation Commission (CNA) and the Superintendency of Higher Education. It also states that higher education institutions are part of this system. The national system is coordinated by a committee made up of the Undersecretary of Higher Education, who chairs it, the President of CNA, the Superintendent of Higher Education, and the President of the National Council of Education.

The new law encompassed substantive changes for the evaluation of the quality of higher education in the country. Unlike prior provisions, the CNA became the only Chilean accrediting agency that can undertake institutional, undergraduate, and graduate programme accreditation, functions that were previously shared with private agencies.

The Superintendency of Higher Education is an institution created as a decentralized public service. It has the function of supervising and monitoring compliance with the legal provisions that regulate higher education institutions, particularly about their resource allocation pursuant to the law and bylaws. License granting to new higher education institutions is the function of the National Council of Education, which also oversees the institution for six years. After this deadline, the institution has a maximum of two years to submit to CNA for accreditation.

CNA is an autonomous body, which has legal standing and its own assets, and its budget is established by law. Evaluations and accreditations have a cost for the university institutions, which allows the body to cover the expenses that quality evaluation and accreditation processes demand. Thus, the Budget Office of the Ministry of Finance annually sets the fees that universities will be charged for the development of these processes. Fees can be paid in up to ten monthly instalments and are the Commission's own funds.

CNA was established in 2006 and its Board of Directors is made up of twelve members: four university academics of renowned prestige and experience in institutional management, undergraduate or graduate teaching; four teachers or professionals of recognized prestige and

experience in professional technical training or institutional management in technical training centres or professional institutes; a teacher or professional of recognized prestige and experience in the area of innovation, selected by the Corporation for the Promotion of Production; a university academic of recognized prestige and experience in scientific or technological research selected by the National Commission for Scientific and Technological Research; and two student representatives from accredited autonomous higher education institutions, representative of each subsystem, thus ensuring the participation of the federation of students. Three of the university academic members and three of the teachers or professionals of the technical training centres or professional institutes are appointed by the President of the Republic with the agreement of three-fifths of the Senate.

The Commission manages and oversees the institutional accreditation processes of autonomous higher education institutions, [30] and of the undergraduate and graduate degrees that are granted; establishes the criteria and quality standards for institutional accreditation, and for undergraduate and graduate programmes, either for technical-professional or for university institutions- after consulting the Coordinating Committee of the National System of Assurance of the Quality of Higher Education; and executes and fosters actions for the ongoing improvement of the quality of higher education institutions, in particular, by identifying, promoting and disseminating among higher education institutions good practices in quality assurance.

Until the enactment of the new Law in 2018, flexible criteria were used for general issues. But since then, it has been established that evaluations must be guided by criteria and standards for accreditation that are drawn up by CNA in consultation with committees made up of experts from higher education institutions. The National Council of Education also approves the disciplinary standards for pedagogical programmes.

Institutional accreditation is mandatory and is based on three levels: basic, advanced and of excellence. All institutions across the system must be accredited. The institutions that obtain the level of excellence, enjoy full autonomy. In case of obtaining the basic level, they can only operate as they are until they reach the subsequent level, but they cannot offer new programmes or set new admission quotas. Conversely, universities within the advanced level can open programmes and set new admission quotas by requesting the corresponding

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[30] According to MINIEDUC definition, HEIs can be autonomous, under licensing or review, and supervised.

authorization. The institution can be accredited at the basic level not further than twice. If it does not obtain a higher level, it cannot continue operating. Accreditation at the basic level lasts for three years; at the advanced level, four or five years; and at the level of excellence, six or seven years.

If a higher education institution is not accredited, the National Council of Education conducts a follow-up for a maximum period of three years. After this period, the institution must re-submit to the CNA for accreditation. In case of not accrediting, it is referred to the Ministry of Education for closure.

The Commission also conducts the accreditation of undergraduate and graduate courses (doctoral degrees, masters, and medical and dental specialties). At the undergraduate level, accreditation for Medicine, Dentistry and Pedagogy is mandatory. Pedagogy accreditation encompasses all level teacher training colleges: kindergarten, basic, secondary, and special education. In order to confer these majors, the university and the programme must be accredited. If a programme whose accreditation is mandatory does not accredit, it must undergo a five-year period of supervision by the National Council of Education, and then it must be re-submitted to CNA for accreditation. For the rest of the undergraduate degrees, accreditation is voluntary. According to the new law, accreditations are requested by calls and accreditation cycles. The period of accreditation is from two to seven years.

At the graduate level, it is mandatory the accreditation of doctoral degrees and it is voluntary the accreditation of master's degrees and health specialties. However, health specialists who wish to work in the public sector and be part of the public registry of health providers, must be graduates from accredited programmes. Accreditation of graduate programmes is valid for two to ten years.

According to the new Law, as of 2026 higher education institutions must have an advanced institutional accreditation level to be able to voluntarily submit programmes for accreditation; they cannot submit any programme if their accreditation is of a basic level, except in the case of mandatory accreditation programmes.
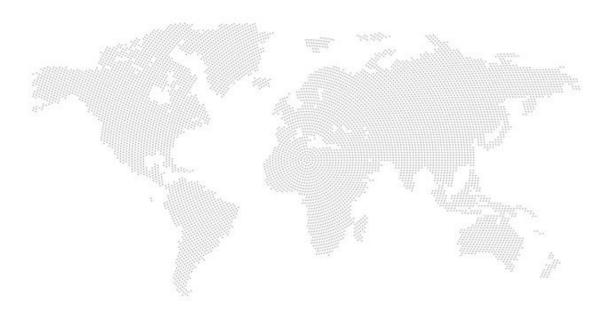
The quality assurance of higher education began in Chile in 1999 with a pilot programme for the accreditation of programmes that later continued with the implementation of institutional accreditation. In 2006, the Higher Education Quality Assurance Law created CNA. Among its functions was to oversee the authorization requests submitted by private agencies

responsible for accrediting undergraduate, master´s and health specialty programmes. CNA also ruled on institutional accreditation and undertook programme accreditation when there were no authorized agencies for that area of knowledge. As mentioned, these functions have changed with the enactment of the 2018 Law granting the CNA the exclusive role of accreditation.

In 2017, CNA was internationally certified by the International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAAHE). This certification guarantees that CNA complies with the good practice guidelines for quality assurance.

Colombia

The quality assurance system for higher education in Colombia was established in 1992 by Law 30, which was complemented by Decree 2230-2003, Law 1188 - 2008 and Decree 1306 -2009. Based on this regulatory framework, the different bodies of quality assurance were created, and their functions were outlined.
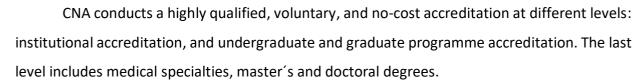
This system is made up of the following bodies: the National Council for Higher Education (by its Spanish acronym, CESU); the National Accreditation Council CNA); the Chambers of the National Intersectoral Commission for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CONACES); and the Permanent Commission for the Quality Assurance System.

CESU is the governing body of higher education. It depends on the national government, and has planning, coordination and advisory functions on issues related to higher education. It is a collegiate body with sixteen members representing different sectors of the university system, public and private, the Ministry of National Education and representatives from the productive sector. It also has the representation of the Rector of the National University of Colombia. CESU has, among others, the functions of organizing the higher education system for new institutions, developing the functions of CAN, and establishing the requirements for the creation and operation of academic programmes.

CNA is an accreditation body that participates in the quality assurance of higher education. It is linked to the Ministry of National Education, with functions of coordination, planning, recommendation, and advice on issues related to the higher education accreditation of programmes and institutions. Its Board of Directors is made up of nine councillors representing various disciplinary areas: health sciences, engineering, education, social sciences, juridical sciences, economic and administrative sciences, natural sciences, and one councillor for technical and technological programmes. One of the members chairs the Coordination of the Council. Members are appointed through public competitive selection processes for five years, without renewal. Public competitive selection processes are carried out by CESU. Accreditation decisions are made by the Council and it issues an evaluation report for submission to the Ministry of Education. Based on this report and the recommendation made by CNA, the Ministry issues an administrative decision. Although the accreditation resolution is granted by the Ministry of National Education, CNA's recommendation is binding.

CNA conducts a highly qualified, voluntary, and no-cost accreditation at different levels: institutional accreditation, and undergraduate and graduate programme accreditation. The last level includes medical specialties, master´s and doctoral degrees.

The period of accreditation may vary according to the results or the strength of the continuous improvement processes. Currently, the terms are under review by CESU, but they can be for four, six, eight or ten years. If the programme or institution does not achieve accreditation, the result is "recommended", and institutions are reported about the weaknesses they must address before submitting a new application. Although accreditation is voluntary, its impact has been growing because of the incentives given to students who join high-quality programmes.

Another institutional arrangement that takes part in the quality assurance of higher education are the CONACES Rooms through the Qualified Registry. CONACES Rooms are made up of the Minister of National Education, the delegate of the Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, and representatives of the advisory bodies of the National Government in matters of higher education and academic issues. Its main functions are the evaluation of the compliance with the requirements for the creation of higher education institutions, their transformation and reorganization, and their academic programmes. To this purpose, CONACES organizes different disciplinary or sectoral rooms made up of academics from all over the country who are selected by public calls for two years. Their appointment may be renewed. These rooms evaluate the projects of institutions and programmes verifying that the minimum quality requirements are met. The evaluation of the CONACES Rooms concludes with the granting or renewal of the Qualified Registry -a requirement for the operation of institutions and programmes- and with the registration in the National Information System of Higher Education (SNIES). The registration entails the operating license for programmes at all training levels. The certificate has a validity period of seven years, after which it must be renewed. To file an application for registration and to be active on the Registry is mandatory and a fee is charged. The Qualified Registry is administered by the Ministry of National Education in consultation with the CONACES Rooms

Institutional evaluations are carried out by a specific Room called the CONACES Room for Institutional Procedures. This Room is entrusted with the creation of institutions and branches. Based on the recommendations made by the Room, CESU makes the decision and

the Ministry issues the administrative ruling. The mechanism is similar for public and private institutions. This Room also evaluates the technical or technological institutions that wish to become a university institution. In addition, there is a specific Room for master´s and doctoral degrees.

CNA and the CONACES Rooms are independent bodies. To seek for consistency between both organizations, in mid-2019, at the initiative of the Ministry, workshops were held throughout the country for diagnostic purposes about the situation of higher education in Colombia. One of the elements observed was the criteria discrepancy in between the two organizations, particularly in programme names.

Study programme names are regulated by the Qualified Registry, but CNA has made some indications in this regard. To avoid inconsistencies, a Permanent Commission for the Quality Assurance System was created, which is made up of members of CESU, of the CONACES Rooms, of CNA and of the Ministry of National Education through the Director for Education Quality of Higher Education and the Vice Minister. This Commission was created in July 2019 and is leading the changes stemming from the debates on new standards for quality assurance at different levels.

The Council has been awarded a distinction on two occasions by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). This evaluation implies having successfully completed the external evaluation process conducted by a panel of international experts on compliance with the Good Practice Guidelines in Quality Assurance. The latest evaluation was conducted in 2017 and is valid for five years.

Costa Rica

The National Higher Education Accreditation System (by its Spanish acronym, SINAES) is the institution that publicly attests to the quality of higher education institutions and programmes that voluntarily undergo an evaluation process and comply with the established quality criteria. It is made up of public and private university higher education institutions that voluntarily submit to its evaluation process and show their compliance with set quality criteria. Its members can be *full members* -those institutions that have fulfilled membership requirements and have the minimum official accreditation of graduate programmes in operation-, *associates* -which have been temporarily admitted by SINAES, under the condition of fulfilling the requirements prescribed by the Membership bylaw, or *para-university* institutions.

SINAES National Accreditation Council is made up of eight members, four elected by state universities and four by private ones. The President and a Vice President are appointed from within their members.

In Costa Rica, SINAES defines the criteria and standards for the accreditation of undergraduate and professional master's degrees, academic master's degrees, and doctoral degrees. Accreditation has a cost for all institutions, both public and private, which contributes to the total financing of the accreditation process.

In 2002, Law 8256 conferred SINAES the power to evaluate and accredit undergraduate and graduate degrees. In 2010, Law 8798 expanded these powers to accredit para-university programmes of two or three years, as well as university and para-university institutions. At the same time, the legal provision granted SINAES public funding. SINAES main concern was the quality of the system in view of the important expansion of private higher education institutions in the 1990s. Although SINAES has stemmed from public universities, the agency did not become operational until four private universities joined it.

Programmes in all knowledge areas are accredited, either for face-to-face or distance learning modalities. SINAES does not make public calls for accreditation but works on demand. As the agency keeps record of the institutions that are conducting the self-evaluation process, it can estimate the number of programmes that it will have to evaluate. According to the Law, graduates from accredited degrees have the right to receive a preferential hiring treatment from the State and its bodies.

SINAES keeps an updated record of professionals, national and foreign, who may be appointed as external peers for the accreditation processes that are carried out. The accreditation of a programme is valid for four years. After the expiration term, programmes must request their review and reaccreditation.

The first stage of the accreditation process consists in the self-evaluation of the degree, which concludes with a report that must submitted to SINAES. Then, two international and one national peer evaluator are appointed, and an institutional visit is scheduled. Peer evaluators must draw up an evaluation report, which is discussed on a council session. SINAES makes an accreditation decision, which may differ from the peers´ recommendations.

The National Council of Rectors (CONARE) has emerged from the Agreement for the Coordination of State University Higher Education in Costa Rica. It is made up of the rectors of the public institutions which signed the agreement. CONARE regulates and coordinates the requirements for the exercise of university autonomy in various areas of the signatory institutions.

The National Council of Private Higher University Education (CONESUP) is the entity that authorizes the creation of private universities and programmes. This body is made up of the Minister of Public Education, who chairs it, a representative appointed by CONARE, a representative of all private universities, a representative of the Office of National Planning, and a representative appointed by the Federation of University Professional Associations. CONESUP is also in charge of the inspection and supervision of the country's private universities.

So far, no institutional evaluations have been conducted. However, there is a bill which seeks to modify some aspects of higher education and quality assurance. One of the changes under debate is the mandatory nature of the institutional evaluation, as well as of the Engineering and Health programmes.

Before SINAES creation, programmes were evaluated through foreign agencies, in some cases by regional entities, especially for engineering and graduate degrees. In 1997, CONARE proposed the creation of SINAES, which was then regulated by Law in 2002, which had an official and mixed status. Both public and private universities may be part of it. In 2001, the Unit of Rectors of Private Universities of Costa Rica (UNIRE) had created the System of
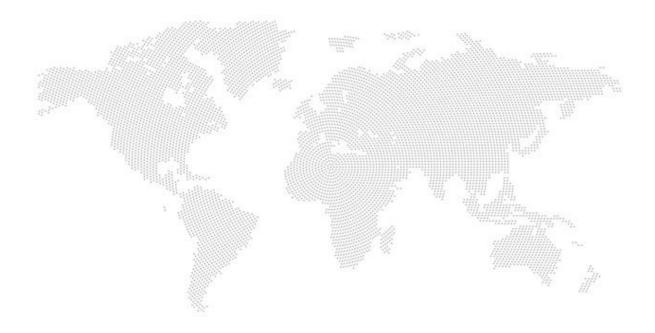
83

Degree Accreditation for Private University Higher Education (SUPRICORI), but it was suppressed after the SINAES creation.

Finally, SINAES has been externally evaluated in 2008 by the Central American Council for Accreditation and in 2010 and 2019, by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

84

Cuba

The National Accreditation Board (by its Spanish initials, JAN), is a government body with national scope, supported by the Ministry of Higher Education. It has the mission to contribute to the improvement of the quality of Cuban higher education through the development and application of the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation System (SEAES).

JAN is the agency that evaluates and accredits the quality of higher education institutions and programmes. It is financed by the Ministry of Higher Education and institutions do not pay any cost for the accreditation processes. It is chaired by a President, an Executive Secretary, and an Executive Secretariat composed of nine members. This Secretariat is supported by the JAN Plenary - made up of forty-eight members whose membership is renewed every four years - and by the Technical Evaluation Committees. The latter are made up of up to thirty experts of national and international prestige, who voluntarily participate in these processes. The plenary meets at least three times a year and votes openly for any category of the institution or programme.

JAN proposes the criteria to evaluate institutions and programmes, which are approved through a consensus reached by rectors, the university community, and employers. The development of proposals is endorsed by international experiences and the pedagogical background of Cuban higher education. Programmes delivered by higher education institutions are authorized by the Ministry of Higher Education, through the Undergraduate Advisory Commission, for the approval of undergraduate degrees; by the National Graduate Advisory Commission, for master's degrees and specializations; and by the National Commission of Scientific Degrees, for doctoral degrees. These commissions are made up of professionals from all over the country.

JAN accredits undergraduate and graduate institutions and programmes in three categories: qualified, certified, or of excellence. The technical evaluating committees make a preliminary category proposal that is then approved by the Plenary. The Minister of Higher Education may participate in the plenary sessions, but cannot either veto or revoke any decision made by JAN. Once an evaluation category is given to a programme or institution it cannot be modified. In the case of programmes, if the institution obtains the qualified category, the validity is for five years; if it is certified, for seven years; and if it is of excellence, for nine years.

For both institutional and programme evaluation, the on-site visit lasts one week. Peer evaluators are appointed for each of the six dimensions under analysis. In general, evaluators are professors from Cuban universities, but in some cases foreign experts are appointed, either as peer reviewers or as process observers.

To be eligible for an institutional evaluation, a university must have 60% of its undergraduate programmes and 60% of its graduate programmes accredited in one of the categories (qualified, certified or of excellence). The institutional evaluation ends up with a report. Peer evaluators also meet graduates´ employers. If these graduates are foreigners, an attempt is made to get information from employers in the country where graduates work. The plenary session also approves the corresponding category and issues the certificate for the university. In case of not getting a category, the institution receives the report, but the result of the accreditation is not published. The approval of new higher education institutions requires a Decree of the President at the proposal of the Ministry of Higher Education, which analyses the request for its creation and operation.

Programme accreditation is voluntary for all degrees. However, foreigners can only study undergraduate and graduate programmes that have been accredited. In the case of graduate programmes, the Ministry may demand the closure of those programmes that have obtained a report of non-accreditation from the JAN or whose accreditation category has expired.

In undergraduate accreditation programmes, the agency assesses students through exams made up by peer evaluators who also audit classes. Graduate performance is also evaluated through employers´ interviews. In the case of medical sciences, the graduate evaluation is carried out in the health centres that are visited in the accreditation processes.

Rectors can request programme accreditation by foreign agencies, but these agencies must be accredited by JAN. There are some universities that have requested accreditation with other agencies or organizations after being accredited by JAN, a practice that is valued by the agency to gather an external view on quality assurance.

Higher education quality assurance processes in Cuba began with the accreditation of master's degrees in 1999. In 2000, by means of a Ministerial Resolution, the National Accreditation Board was created as a specialized and independent unit from the rest of the functional directorates of the Minister of Higher Education.

Dominican Republic

In 2018, through Resolution 27 of the National Council for Higher Education, Science and Technology (by its Spanish acronym, CONESCyT), the Dominican Subsystem for the Quality Assurance of Higher Education (SIDACES) was created. SIDACES is part of the National System of Higher Education, Science and Technology, which is led by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (by its Spanish initials, MESCYT). As stated in its mission statement, among its purposes are, "to generate a culture that fosters and develops quality as a continuous and integral process, as well as to establish public policies addressing it."

In order to organize, articulate, manage and develop the set of non-regulatory mechanisms and processes of SIDACES, the creation of the Dominican Agency for the Assurance of the Quality of Higher Education (ADACES) was proposed as a decentralized public body, attached to the MESCYT, and endowed with technical and administrative autonomy. ADACES is just starting but it is expected to be under the supervision of the Council for the Quality Assurance of Higher Education (COACES). This Council will be made up of the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology or, by delegation, of the Vice Minister of evaluation and accreditation; an Executive Director, who will be the secretary, with voice, but without vote; four members of the academic community appointed by the CONESCyT; and a member representing the Academy of Sciences of the Dominican Republic, selected by it. Organisms or entities, such as professional associations or trade unions, among others, will also be part of its management structure, on a consultative basis and by invitation. The Assembly of Rectors will be a permanent advisory body and will have a designated representative.

In the Dominican Republic, different bodies participate in quality assurance. The authorization and operation of new HEIs depends on CONESCyT. Likewise, this council approves the programmes submitted by HEIs. ADACES is responsible for institutional and programme evaluation. Evaluation will be carried out systematically and consistently through cycles followed by improvement plans, which will be monitored. Thus, a progressive improvement mechanism is expected to be established.

In addition, ADACES is expected to develop standards regarding the institutional context, inputs, processes, results, and impact on the performance of the HEIs and of their programme offer. The standards will be oriented to guide the work of the HEIs, in order to contribute that

their graduates exercise their citizenship in a context of solidarity, respect and promotion of civilized coexistence, It is also pursued that professionals manage to insert themselves effectively and creatively into the national and international productive system.

In this sense, in 2019 a commission made up of CONESCyT and the Vice Ministry of HEIs Evaluation and Accreditation created a framework with standards for institutional evaluation and accreditation. National and international experts were appointed for developing quality assurance outlines and standards for higher education. The document establishes that the evaluation process should be organized in eight dimensions: Institutional Management; Academic Management; Research; Outreach Activities; Students; Academic Staff; Institutional Support Services and Structures; and Quality Assurance.

Based on these standards, public and private HEIs must undergo a Quinquennial Evaluation (EQ) by private accreditation entities. This process, which is carried out every five years, involves a diagnostic evaluation of the regulatory and operational aspects of institutional units, which enables compliance with standardized quality criteria.

In fact, the five-year evaluation process is an accreditation, but it is not considered as such in the regulations. The Law defines accreditation as a temporary, social, and institutional process, by which the quality level of a higher education institution, programme, or of any of its functions or components, is publicly recognized. The process concludes with a certification stating that the evaluated institution or programme complies with pre-established quality standards.

An evaluation system was recently approved for the Five-Year Evaluation: if the university does not achieve the minimum level, it must submit an improvement plan and cannot enrol students until it addresses the observations made. The institution closure may also be ruled until the provisions of current regulations are complied with. In these cases, expert opinions are issued by the Vice Ministry of Evaluation and Accreditation.

Universities have up to a year to complete their self-study. An external evaluation is then conducted, which includes an expert visit to the University. Accreditation periods have not yet been defined, but according to international criteria, it is expected that they may be valid for five to seven years.

Universities must afford the operational expenses of evaluation and accreditation, such as evaluators´ travel expenses and fees, but as it is a public service in charge of a State Agency, no fees are charged.

ADACES is expected to carry out the institutional evaluation of higher technical studies, as well as of undergraduate and graduate programmes. In principle, evaluation will also be voluntary, but the compulsory nature of the accreditation of some degrees is under analysis. It is also expected that ADACES will become the official entity that evaluates the pertinence of other national and international agencies, so that they may be recognized by CONESCyT.

Some universities in the Dominican Republic already have programmes internationally accredited. It is worth mentioning that a seat of the Greater Caribbean Regional Engineering Accreditation System (GCREAS) is in the country.

Finally, Law 139/01 establishes an admission exam for students entering higher education conducted by MESCYT to provide the basis for admission criteria, develop levelling programmes and plan training activities.

Ecuador

The quality assurance system in Ecuador is ruled by the Organic Law of Higher Education sanctioned in 2010 and amended by Supplement 297-2018. According to article 15, the bodies that make up the National Higher Education System are the Higher Education Council (by its Spanish initials, CES), the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (CACES), and the Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation Secretariat (SENESCYT), which is the governing body for higher education public policy.

Among other functions, SENESCYT establishes coordination mechanisms between the Executive Branch and the Higher Education System; identifies study programmes of public interest in accordance with the National Development Plan, and creates the necessary incentives for higher education institutions to prioritize these programmes in their academic offer. It also designs, implements, manages and coordinates the National Information System for Higher Education in Ecuador and the Academic Levelling and Admission System; draws up technical reports for the resolution of the Higher Education Council in all cases related to the objectives of the National Development Plan; and prepares the technical reports required by the Higher Education Council to support its resolutions.

CES is the body responsible for planning, regulating, and coordinating the Higher Education System, and the relationship among its different actors with the Executive Branch and the Ecuadorian society. It is made up of ten full members: four representatives of the Executive, who come from the Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation or its delegates; the National Secretariat of Planning; the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Production. The remaining six members are academics appointed by a public, competitive, and merit-based selection. Likewise, three representatives of students from public universities or polytechnic schools, private universities and higher institutes or conservatories participate in the sessions with voice but without vote. Student representatives are elected by competitive and merit-based procedures. They also have permanent representatives, with the right to speak, but without vote, three representatives from the Assembly of the Higher Education System and a counsellor from CACES.

CES is also responsible for the design of the Development Plan for the Higher Education System, in coordination with the governing body of the higher education policy and with the

Higher Education System. This Plan establishes strategic goals in term s of educational coverage and quality. CES also submits conclusive reports to the competent bodies about the creation or rejection of new higher education institutions. These reports are supported by CACES and the Technical Secretariat of the National Planning Council. Only the conclusive reports about the approval for operation or its denial are considered by the competent bodies to continue with the corresponding procedures. Thus, once compliance with the basic quality criteria and standards established by CACES is verified, CES approves the creation, suspension, or closure of higher education institutions, as well as the creation of graduate programmes. CES is also empowered to penalize institutions that do not comply with the operative rules and requirements.

The quality assessment of undergraduate and graduate programmes at the institutional level is undertaken by CACES. This Council is made up of three academics selected publicly through competitive, and merit-based procedures organized by the National Electoral Council, and three academics appointed by the President of the Republic. Equity, alternation, and gender parity are considered in their appointment. This Council regulates institutional self-evaluation and conducts the external evaluation and accreditation processes. Higher education institutions, both public and private, and their undergraduate and graduate programmes, must undergo mandatory external evaluation and accreditation. Furthermore, they must organize the processes that contribute to internal quality assurance.

Higher education institutions can also undergo evaluation processes that are aimed at obtaining high quality academic qualifications. This activity is voluntary and accessory to the institutional evaluation. Academic qualification can be conducted at the institutional or programme level and is the result of the evaluation carried out by the Council for Quality Assurance of Higher Education without accreditation purposes. It refers to the fulfilment of its mission, vision, aims and goals, within the framework of quality, relevance, and integrity.

For the institutional and programme evaluation, CACES establishes guidelines ruled by quantitative and qualitative criteria and standards. When a higher education institution or a programme is not accredited for non-compliance with these standards, CACES requests the institution to develop and implement an improvement plan for up to three years, which is supported by this body. At the end of the term, a new external evaluation must be carried out. If non-compliance with the criteria and standards persists, the institution or programme is

closed. CES is responsible for the decision on the closure of institutions or programmes, based on an evaluation report made by CACES.

For the accreditation of undergraduate courses, the requirements established for assessing the learning environment must be met. For this purpose, students who are finishing their studies are assessed by CACES within the accreditation framework. This process is conducted by the Council, in coordination with the governing body of the Higher Education Public Policy. In the event that more than 40% of the students of a programme fail the exam on two consecutive times, the higher education institution is subject to a partial intervention of the academic unit responsible for the programme, and is evaluated by the Council of Higher Education.

CACES also develops a qualification exam and issues a certificate for the professional qualifications of programmes considered of public interest. Degrees that may be subject of this authorization are defined by the governing body of higher education public policy in coordination with CES. For these degrees, the study programmes must consider the basic curricular contents and professional practise intensity requirements set forth by CES in coordination with higher education institutions and professional associations. In the case of programmes in the health field, the exam is a prerequisite for one-year-practice required by health regulations.

The current system is based on the Organic Law of Higher Education passed in 2010, which reorganized the higher education system. Its implementation brought about the closure of university institutions and the dissemination of accreditation processes as a quality assurance model. Although the CACES was created in 2018, it has an institutional continuity with the work started by the Council for the Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education (CEAACES) created in 2010.

El Salvador

El Salvador Higher Education Law was approved in 1995. It entrusted the Ministry of Education to develop evaluation processes of higher education institutions (HEIs), in order to evaluate their institutional and programme academic quality. It comprises three subsystems: Qualification, Evaluation and Accreditation. The first two are mandatory for HEIs, whilst the accreditation is voluntary.

In 2018, a proposal for a National Higher Education Policy was drawn up by all the members of the Multisectoral Pact for the Development of the National Higher Education Policy. In its drafting participated the Ministry of Education (by its Spanish acronym, MINED), the Ministry of Economy (MINEC), the Higher Education Council (CES), the MINED Quality Accreditation Commission (CdA), the Central American Accreditation Council (CCA), the Council of Professional Associations of El Salvador (CAPES), the Salvadoran Institute of Professional Training (INSAFORP) and the legislative commission for culture and education. Central American University José Simeón Cañas, Don Bosco University, Francisco Gavidia University and El Salvador Catholic University also participated in this proposal for establishing a national system for quality accreditation of higher education, autonomous, efficient, financially adequate and solvent, with the capacity of developing gradual processes for quality improvement and promotion. They also seek to implement a compulsory institutional accreditation with high standards of quality, backed up by an incentive system based on recognized advances in quality. Finally, the accountability of the National Higher Education System (SNES) is promoted according to the fulfillment of institutional aims.

Guided by these objectives, the national system seeks to establish a Council of Rectors as the responsible body committed to the governance of SNES, made up of the institutional highest executive authority. The council aim will be the joint development of proposals harmonizing with the vision of the governing body. Besides, the Council of Higher Education, Science and Technology (CESCYT) will be established for its strategic participation in decision-making and for the promotion of public policies.

Between 2000 and 2005, accreditation was a voluntary mechanism in the country applied by a ministerial body, the Higher Education Quality Accreditation Commission. It was made up of seven renowned and distinguished academic members, who did not represent any

93

institution, and were appointed by mutual agreement between the Minister of Education and the Council of Higher Education.

As it was not possible to support with primary sources the information provided about the process of higher education quality assurance in the country; data and facts in this section come from bibliographic reviews and other secondary sources.

Guatemala

In Guatemala, the public and private education systems operate with absolute independence. In this sense, they do not have any coordinating body to carry out formal actions to coordinate efforts. However, at their own initiative, Rectors of all universities meet in a forum.

The fifth section of the Guatemala Constitution recognizes the autonomy of the University of San Carlos de Guatemala (by its Spanish initials, USAC), the only public university in the country. It also leads the higher education in the State and is entrusted to sanction its own rules and regulations. Furthermore, it is the only body that can recognize university degrees or diplomas granted abroad.

University of San Carlos is ruled by its Organic Law, which establishes that its government is exercised by the Higher University Council, the highest decision-making body, chaired by the Rector and made up of the deans of each of the approved faculties, one representative for the students, another for the full professors and a graduate from each faculty.

The article 86 of the Political Constitution has created the Council for Higher Private Education (CEPS), a body to which the Constitution assigns the functions of ensuring academic quality levels for private universities. This Council has the functions of authorizing the creation of new universities and of providing sanctions for infringements. Its internal regulations establish that it is made up of two representatives from the USAC; two representatives from private universities, and one representative elected by the presidents of Professional Associations, who does not hold any position in any university.

Upon authorization by CEPS, private universities may carry out, in accordance with their statutes, regulations and other internal provisions and rules, the following activities: create faculties, departments and institutes; develop their academic, teaching, scientific research and dissemination of cultural activities, as well as those related to problem solving and study abilities. They also develop their study programmes and grant degrees for professional activities. In brief, this scope of activities entails that they are entrusted with organizing the private higher education system.

After the university training, graduates must compulsorily join a professional association, because professional practice is specifically regulated by Professional Associations under the Professional Association Law. According to its provisions, university professional

95

practice must be controlled for the purpose of improving its moral, scientific, technical, cultural, economic, and material dimensions.

As it was not possible to support with primary sources the information provided here about the process of higher education quality assurance in the country, data and facts collected in this section come from bibliographic reviews and other secondary sources.

Honduras

According to the Constitution of the Republic, the National Autonomous University of Honduras (by its Spanish initials, UNAH) leads the higher education system. The Higher Education Council is the highest governing body of the higher education system and is made up of the rector of the UNAH, who presides over it, six representatives from the same university, six rectors or directors of higher education centres, and the responsible for the Directorate of Higher Education, with voice but without vote.

In 2010 by the Agreement 2304, this Council created the Honduran System of Quality Accreditation in Higher Education (SHACES), the entity responsible for developing the quality evaluation and accreditation processes of institutions and programme in the country. The organizational structure of SHACES was initiated in March 2016, with the National Commission for Accreditation of the Quality of Higher Education, which is its highest authority. The system was completed with an Executive Directorate, which is responsible for carrying out the policies stemming from the Commission, a Technical Committee, the *ad hoc* Specialized Committees, and the Academic Peer Committees.

The National Commission for Accreditation for the Quality of Higher Education is made up of six representatives from public universities, six representatives from private universities, one representative from the National Council for Competitiveness and Innovation, one representative from the Federation of Professional University Associations of Honduras, and a representative of the Honduran Council of Private Enterprise. The Agreement establishes that in the event of a future increase in the number of public universities, UNAH will maintain its permanent representation.

SHACES was created as an autonomous body with academic, technical, administrative, and financial capacities, and is responsible for developing the quality evaluation and accreditation processes of higher education institutions and programmes in the country. It establishes the criteria, standards, definitions, instruments, and indicators for the different evaluation processes. The State provides 50% of its operative costs, and the remaining is financed by higher education institutions, both public and private, distributed according to the number of students enrolled in the institution in the previous academic year. Institutional or programme accreditation is expected to have a cost that will be regulated by the National Accreditation Commission.

The granting of licenses to institutions and programmes is within the Council of Higher Education capacity; SHACES is not part of this process. The Agreement establishes that institutional and undergraduate accreditation is mandatory but does not provide for accreditation at graduate level. If an institution is not able to accredit, it must develop an improvement plan and submit an application. The improvement plan is developed according to a protocol provided by SHACES and its implementation is mandatory. Thus, there are still institutions that have not carried out institutional accreditation. The accreditation of undergraduate programmes has not yet been implemented, but the first call for applications is scheduled to take place soon. The period for accreditation will be five years or three years with the development of an improvement plan.

SHACES is a newly established body. For this reason, the institutional accreditation of only some higher education institutions has begun, but no calls for programmes have yet been made. Prior to SHACES establishment, some universities, such as the UNAH and the National Pedagogic University (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional), were accredited by foreign agencies.

Mexico

In Mexico, two quality assurance subsystems coexist. On the one hand, there are private accrediting bodies that are recognized and supervised by the Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education (by its Spanish initials, COPAES). On the other hand, there is a subsystem coordinated by the Inter-Institutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CIEES). Higher education institutions can request accreditation of undergraduate programmes from both the system regulated by COPAES or CIEES. Apart from these two organizations, the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT), which conducts accreditation at the graduate level, participates in quality assurance in Mexico, and the National Centre for Higher Education Evaluation (CENEVAL). Currently, the State fosters quality assurance but it is not an authority within the system.

The National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (ANUIES) plays a key role in the university system. ANUIES is a non-governmental, pluralistic association, that brings together the main institutions of higher education in the country. It seeks to encourage a comprehensive improvement in the fields of teaching, research and the extension of culture and services. The association comprises 197 universities and higher education institutions, both public and private, from all over the country. In 2000, this association agreed to create the Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education (COPAES), a non-governmental body responsible for regulating the accreditation of programmes through the authorization of specialized bodies by discipline. At present, there are thirty quality assurance accreditation bodies regulated by COPAES.

COPAES operates in agreement with the Secretary of Public Education (SEP). It is directed by a General Assembly made up of a representative from each associated entity: SEP, ANUIES, the Federation of Private Mexican Institutions of Higher Education (FIMPES), the Mexican Academy of Sciences, CIEES, and professional associations.

COPAES seeks to evaluate and authorize accreditation discipline-based bodies. The evaluation carried out by COPAES is mandatory for the organizations, as it enables them to operate. There were some accrediting bodies prior to the subsystem creation, such as the National Council for Teaching and Research in Psychology, a body designed to evaluate psychology study programmes, which was created in the 1970s. Over time, other discipline-based entities have been established.

COPAES has set the general framework and guidelines for discipline-based programme evaluations. This framework comprises ten categories and general indicators. Each accrediting body is empowered to adjust it to its disciplinary field. Once accrediting bodies are authorized by COPAES, they must appoint their authorities, academic staff, and peer reviewers – academic staff from educational institutions or recognized experts in the area. Accrediting bodies must renew their authorization every five years, and they may obtain different results: renewal, conditional renewal, or non-renewal.

Degree accreditation is not mandatory but voluntary. Depending on the discipline, higher education institutions may request accreditation from the corresponding accrediting body. The results are accreditation or non-accreditation. The period for accreditation is five years. After two and a half years, a visit is made to evaluate the institution monitoring of the improvement plan, based on the recommendations made. If a programme does not accredit, it must comply with the recommendations and resubmit for accreditation.

The CIEES were established in 1991 and gave rise to the culture of quality of higher education in Mexico. They are presided over by the General Assembly of Associates, which is made up of the heads of the following institutions: SEP, ANUIES, FIMPES Subsecretaries of Higher Education, the Mexican Academy of Sciences (AMC), COPAES and the State Commission for Educational Planning in the State of Guanajuato (COEPES / Guanajuato).

The CIEES are made up of nine Inter-institutional committees, organized according to knowledge areas. The nine committees are made up of academics who come from all types of higher education institutions (HEIs) and from all the states of the country and are renewed periodically. Their function is to rule on the quality of the HEIs educational programmes.

Institutional accreditation is carried out by the CIEES as one of the committees has this expertise. Institutional accreditation is modular. CIEES also evaluate study programmes from different knowledge areas, modalities (face-to-face, blended, or online learning) and levels (undergraduate and graduate), in addition to evaluating and accrediting normal schools and teacher training colleges, and participating in the granting of licenses for private institutions. CIEES have a federal subsidy.

The accreditation process begins with a self-assessment study that is backed up by a group of agency advisers. This phase takes from five to seven months. Once completed, a committee made up of three peer reviewers by discipline from different institutions is assigned.

Based on the peers´ report, CIEES issue a two-tier expert report related to the accreditation period, which can be three or five years, and recommendations that the institution must comply with and must be reviewed over a period of time.

FIMPES brings together private institutions and is in charge of accrediting them. However, institutions can request accreditation from another body.

CONACYT is responsible for the evaluation of the graduate level, which is conducted through public calls. Accreditation deadlines vary depending on whether they are related to professional or academic master's degrees, or doctoral degrees. The Council evaluates professional and research master's degrees, doctoral degrees, and medical specializations. CONACYT also awards graduate scholarships related to the programme degree accreditation.

CENEVAL also participates in the higher education quality assurance system. It is a non-profit civil association whose main activity is test construction and administration to assess knowledge, skills and competencies, as well as test analysis of results and publications. CENEVAL´s highest authority is the General Assembly, made up of educational institutions, organizations, professional associations, social and productive organizations, as well as governmental educational authorities. It is the body responsible for the university admission exam, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, in addition to the exit examination for different disciplinary study programmes. Although the latter is not compulsory in Mexico, some HEIs establish it as a graduation requirement and others propose it as an alternative to the thesis development. Institutions that implement this exam enter into an agreement with CENEVAL, which charges a fee to administer it.

The licensing of HEIs is within the scope of SEPS, the Secretariats of Education of the Federal Entities, and the Autonomous Universities. It is conducted through several bodies depending on the higher education subsystems. Currently, in Mexico there are thirteen subsystems[31] that vary according to the autonomy they have and the governmental body that regulates them. Seven of these subsystems depend directly on SEP through different organizations: the General Coordination of Technological and Polytechnic Universities (CGUTyP) coordinates the polytechnic and technological universities; the National Technological Institute

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[31] Subsystems are State Public Universities; Federal Public Universities; Federal Technological Institutes; Decentralized Technological Institutes; Technological Universities; Polytechnic Universities; Publicly-owned teacher training colleges; State public universities with special subsidies; Intercultural Universities; Public Research Centres; other public institutions of higher education; Private universities, and Privately-owned teacher training colleges.

of Mexico (TecNM) coordinates the centralized and decentralized technological institutes; the General Directorate of Higher Education for Education Professionals (DGESPE) coordinates public teacher training institutions; the General Directorate of Higher University Education (DGESU) coordinates the state public universities; and the General Coordination of Intercultural and Bilingual Education (CGEIB) coordinates the intercultural universities.

Some autonomous universities may grant recognition to other institutions that provide higher education within the Federal Entity to which they belong if they do not contradict their own scope of activities. However, the recognition granted by an autonomous university is not valid throughout the country and is limited to the State where the authorization was submitted.

Privately-run institutions can request the state or federal authority for authorization to start their operations. Currently, the state or federal authority grants permits based on the assessment of minimum requirements. Once an institution has graduates from its study programmes, it may be accredited if it demonstrates compliance with set standards. Although there are private institutions that are operating without this official recognition, this situation is expected to change with the reform of the national educational system, which is currently under consideration.

All the organizations that conduct the accreditation of programmes and institutions are civil associations. Only CONACyT is a decentralized government body. As a regulatory body, COPAES is supported by the federal government, but this is not the case of the thirty accrediting bodies that it oversees. CIEES receive direct federal subsidies.

In 2019, the discussion on the bill for the General Education Law began, which would be complemented by a General Law of Higher Education. At the time of this publication, the creation of a single quality system was under consideration on the debate regarding these new regulations. The intention is to unify the different entities that currently coexist in the country for the assurance of higher education quality.

Nicaragua

In 2006, the National Council for Evaluation and Accreditation of the National Educational System (by its Spanish initials, CNEA) was created by Law 704 to ensure quality assurance and the continuous improvement at all levels of the public and private national educational system. According to the Law, non-academic state entities, professional associations, employers 'representatives, professional and scientific associations, trade unions and parents' associations participate in the national council, according to their nature and purposes.

CNEA is a collegiate body made up of a President, a Vice President and three members elected by the National Assembly, who are appointed for five years. Universities, the President of the Republic, or the Council of Universities appoint its members. who must have ten years of teaching experience, hold at least a master's degree and have knowledge about education or educational quality.

Among its functions, CNEA accredits the academic quality of institutions and programmes; approves quality criteria, standards and indicators to be used in the accreditation processes; makes up the national evaluation and accreditation commissions of the different educational subsystems; and builds up the National Registry of Peer Reviewers. Likewise, CNEA authorizes and supervises the establishment and operation of private agencies for accreditation of education quality.

CNEA has developed national commissions for each educational subsystem, which technically support academic issues. Commissions draw up quality standards that must be reviewed every five years.

Higher education institutions, public and private, legally established in the country, must necessarily submit themselves to institutional evaluation. To do this, they must first develop, for a period not longer than two years, a self-assessment process that includes all their locations, and research, and social outreach centres.

Once the self-evaluation has been completed, CNEA conducts an external verification process through peer evaluators that are selected from the National Register of Peers, and an improvement plan is set up. The plan comprises the activities that the institution must develop over the next three years in order to overcome the limitations or insufficiencies found in the

self-assessment study and in the external verification process. After the first five years, a follow up is carried out to assess whether the institution meets the minimum quality standards.

In case of compliance, the institution starts up a second cycle: it must undergo again a two-year self-evaluation and other three years of compliance with the improvement plan. It is still being discussed whether the institutions must partially or fully comply with the minimum standards, but if they do not comply, a request for the institution closure is sent to the National Assembly. If the institution or programme meets the criteria, standards, and indicators, CNEA grants it a Certificate of Accreditation which is valid for seven years.

Currently, Nicaraguan universities are going through the first cycle of self-evaluation, which comprises the improvement plan and the verification of minimum quality levels. According to the Law, these universities will be able to obtain institutional accreditation in 2025, after the second cycle of self-evaluation and improvements. Only accredited universities can accredit their undergraduate and graduate programmes. This process is carried out and overseen by agencies authorized by CNEA. Thus, in Nicaragua programmes will not be accredited before 2025.

Universities must pay for the expenses involved in the peer reviewing process. Peer evaluators are selected from the country's academic community. International peers may also participate through agreements entered with the National Accreditation Board (JAN) of the Republic of Cuba and with the Costa Rica and El Salvador agencies.

Public universities are created by the National Assembly, and private universities are authorized by the National Council of Universities (CNU), which also carries out their monitoring for two years after their creation.

The first CNEA was established in 2007 but did not operate due to budgetary problems. In 2011, a new Law was enacted through which the System of National Quality Assurance of Education was created. In 2013, the CNEA Higher Education Commission started its operation.

Panama

The National System of Evaluation and Accreditation for the Improvement of Higher Education Quality in Panama was created by Law 30 in 2006. However, a decree regulating its operation was issued four years later, thus the system has been under way since 2011. In 2015, Law 52 was enacted, but its regulations were approved in August 2018. These temporary gaps between the enactment of the Law and its regulations have created discontinuities in the accreditation processes and imply that the system is still under development, and that instruments adapted to the new regulations are being developed.

The System is made up of the Ministry of Education, the National Council for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher University Education of Panama (by its Spanish acronym, CONEAUPA), the Technical Commission for Academic Development (CTDA), the Council of Rectors of Panama and the Association of Private Universities of Panama. The last two mentioned entities are advisory bodies.

CONEAUPA was created as an autonomous and representative body from the different sectors that make up the Panamanian university system. Its board of directors is made up of eleven members: a representative of the Ministry of Education; a representative of the Ministry of Economy and Finance; a representative of the Secretariat of Science, Technology and Innovation; a representative of the Education, Culture and Sports Commission of the National Assembly; the Executive Secretary of CONEAUPA (with voice only); two representatives from public universities; two representatives from private universities; a representative of the National Council of Private Enterprise; a member of professional organizations; and a member of the National Council of Education.

CTDA is chaired by the rector of the University of Panama and is made up of the five official universities financed by the State budget. This Commission is responsible for approving all study programmes, statutes, and their modifications, as well as for supervising the quality of academic activities and the recognition of the degrees granted by universities. The Commission monitors the new institution operations, submits the reports to CONEAUPA, and authorizes the presentation of their academic programmes for accreditation.

As established by law, CONEAUPA is the body responsible for conducting and developing the accreditation processes. Through this body, the system carries out institutional,

undergraduate degree and graduate programme accreditations. All processes involve three phases: self-evaluation, external evaluation by peer evaluators, and the accreditation decision made by CONEAUPA. CONEAUPA also draws up and approves the guidelines for developing evaluation processes. It establishes the criteria, indicators, and quality standards.

To conduct the evaluation processes, *ad hoc* technical commissions are established. They comprise a minimum of three evaluators that are selected from the register of External Academic Peers, according to the nature and context of the University, its knowledge area and study programmes. If the university is official, most of the peer reviewers must come from official universities; on the other hand, if it is private, the majority must come from a private university.

Institutional accreditation is mandatory for all institutions, public or private, that have completed eight years since their creation. More recently created institutions can submit themselves voluntarily. Institutional accreditation is valid for six years and once this period has elapsed, they must undergo a new accreditation.

Before the enactment of the new Law, between 2011 and 2014, CONEAUPA carried out accreditation processes. As of the 2018 regulations, the launching of a new call has been planned for 2020.

CONEAUPA must also make calls by discipline for graduate programmes. According to what is established by Law, Universities must accredit at least two graduate programmes per call. In other words, accreditation is mandatory for at least two programmes per university and it is voluntary for the rest.

So far, only the call for undergraduate degrees in Health Sciences has been made and the graduate accreditation has not been launched yet. At the time of this report, neither the graduate levels nor the disciplines have been defined.

Private universities must have a favourable report from CTDA as a prerequisite, both for institutional accreditation and for undergraduate and graduate degrees. The validity period for the accreditation can be four, five or six years, depending on the degree of compliance with indicators.

CTDA and CONEAUPA grant the licensing of new institutions and the Ministry of Education issues the final decision. CTDA is responsible for the approval of the new institution project and its academic offer, as well as for the review of its statutes and study programmes.

Based on the CTDA technical report, CONEAUPA draws up an executive report about the institutional project feasibility and consistency. This report is then submitted to the Ministry of Education. This procedure for the creation of institutions is carried out both for the granting of the provisional or definitive authorization, as well as for its closure when non-compliance with the minimum requirements is detected. In addition, the CTDA is the body responsible for monitoring and supervising private universities. It also submits the reports to CONEAUPA and authorizes the presentation of academic programmes for accreditation.

Regarding the financing of the organizations, both the Commission and CONEAUPA have a national budget to finance their activities and make the necessary contributions for the fulfilment of their functions. It is also established that official and private Universities must pay fees for institutional and programme evaluation and accreditation services.

Panama is currently the headquarters of the Central American Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CCA), a second-level accreditation agency responsible for granting international validity to the accreditation of the quality of Higher Education that is carried out in different countries in the Central American region. This Council also promotes quality improvement processes through agreements with extra-regional organizations, such as the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) and the High Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (by its French initials, HCERES).

CCA was created by seven States: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize. Until 2016, it was hosted by the University of Costa Rica and since then, by the five public universities of Panama. Its accreditation processes are voluntary in all cases and have a cost for the agencies. Accreditation terms can be three, five or seven years.

Paraguay

The quality assurance system for higher education in Paraguay is made up of four bodies: the National Council of Higher Education (by its Spanish acronym, CONES), the Ministry of Education and Sciences, the National Agency for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (ANEAES) ; and the National Council of Science and Technology of Paraguay (CONACYT).
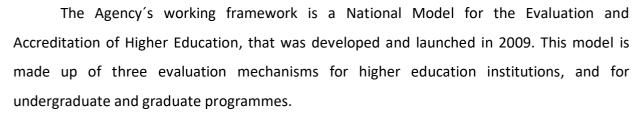
CONES was created by Law 4995 in 2013 and is the governing body of higher education in the country. Its main function is the licensing, closure or intervention of higher education institutions and programmes. In addition, it has the authority to penalize institutions for infringements or non-compliance with the established requirements. For decision making, CONES is based on evaluation reports submitted by ANEAES, which operates as an advisory body. ANEAES must keep CONES informed about study programmes and institutions for it to make decisions accordingly. Some institutions have been audited, intervened, or closed.

According to the Law, CONES is a collegiate body made up of regular members and alternates, representing institutions linked to the National Higher Education System, including: the Minister of Education and Sciences; the rector of the National University of Asunción; the Catholic University; public universities; private universities; the National Council of Education and Culture; the Higher Institutes of the public sector; the Higher Institutes of the private sector; the National Council of Science and Technology; a student representative of public universities; and a student representative of private universities.

The Ministry of Education and Sciences keeps a record of the undergraduate and graduate degrees, but its functions are administrative. ANEAES is responsible for the evaluation and accreditation of the academic quality of undergraduate and graduate programmes and institutions. In addition, it develops technical reports on the academic requirements of higher education institutions and programmes. The agency was created in 2003 after the enactment of Law 2072. Its governing body is the Board of Directors, which comprises a representative from the Ministry of Education and Sciences, two from the body that brings together public and private higher education institutions, one from the federations of university professional organizations, and one from the federations that make up the associations of the productive sector.

The Agency´s working framework is a National Model for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education, that was developed and launched in 2009. This model is made up of three evaluation mechanisms for higher education institutions, and for undergraduate and graduate programmes.

The evaluation and accreditation mechanism for undergraduate programmes comprises definitions of quality criteria for every degree programme. They are based on documents developed and validated in a participatory way by consultative commissions. These commissions consisted of representatives from public and private higher education institutions, trade unions, and stakeholders within the disciplinary area -for example, the Ministry of Education and Sciences, the Ministry of Public Health - and other entities related to professional degree qualifications. Once validated by the academic community, these criteria are approved by the ANEAES Board of Directors. Currently, the National Model has 32 quality criteria corresponding to the undergraduate mechanism through which more than forty degrees are evaluated. At present, other ten criteria are being developed.

The evaluation and accreditation mechanism for graduate programmes was developed by consultants and validated at meetings held with representatives from institutions with graduate programmes, from CONES, and from the Council of Rectors. Currently, the mechanism has been approved and is under operation. It has a quality assessment matrix for the evaluation of master's and Doctoral programmes, and another one for medical specialties. These programmes have specific quality criteria, drawn up and validated with the same procedures used for undergraduate programmes. So far, there are criteria set out for four medical specialties and four others are underway.

With the support of international consultant services, the Agency is currently working on the elaboration and validation of two mechanisms for the evaluation and accreditation of undergraduate and graduate degrees, respectively, implemented in the distance education modality.

The institutional evaluation and accreditation mechanism were developed and validated with the support of international consultants. Between 2015 and 2016, an experimental mechanism was implemented in some higher education institutions, public and private, for diagnostic purposes. These evaluations issued a series of recommendations for improvement

without resulting in accreditation. Finally, in 2019 the Agency approved the institutional assessment and accreditation mechanism and its guidelines.

All evaluations are conducted by expert peer committees made up of two national professionals and one foreign expert. Committee members are randomly selected from a list of eligible evaluators by discipline. This criterion is like the one used by ARCU-SUR peer reviewers' system. The agency has a national registry of peer reviewers that includes national experts and foreign professionals from the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), Mexico, Colombia, Panama, and Costa Rica. To be part of that registry, potential candidates must go through a selection and training process.

As established by Law 2072/03, participation in external evaluation and accreditation processes is voluntary except for programmes related to law, medicine, dentistry, engineering, architecture, and agricultural sciences, and for those programmes granting degrees for professions whose practice could endanger people´s integrity or property. To shed light on this legal provision, the agency has defined the degrees that must compulsorily be evaluated. They are 44 undergraduate programmes and all medical speciality graduate programmes. Accreditation is conducted provided programmes have graduates. ANEAES also conducts evaluations for diagnostic purposes of programmes that do not have graduates.

Regarding process periodicity, the agency carries out one or two calls per year. Until 2018, the accreditation periods were five years. Since 2019, the system has been modified and the terms of accreditation can vary from four to six years, depending on the results provided by a numeric scale qualification. Programmes that have weaknesses that can be amended in the short term, a postponement of nine-month is granted. During this period, improvements should be made. Universities must then submit a report and a peer review visit must be arranged. After that, a resolution of accreditation or non-accreditation is issued.

CONACYT is a collegiate body whose mission is to promote scientific and technological research, and the generation, dissemination and transfer of knowledge; invention, innovation, scientific and technological education, the development of national technologies and the management of science, technology and innovation. It oversees the research projects that are developed in higher education institutions. Therefore, there is a close and coordinated link between ANEAES and CONACYT. The agency appoints advisory commissions to define evaluation criteria that can be made up by academics linked to CONACYT research programmes.

Regarding costs, private universities must pay for the fees. They may vary depending on whether they correspond to a degree accreditation, a diagnostic evaluation, or a follow up evaluation of the improvement plan for degree programmes whose accreditation was postponed. Evaluations and accreditations for public institutions bear no costs. In graduate evaluations, visit costs must be afforded according to the disciplinary area and the number of programmes that are evaluated simultaneously.

In Paraguay, higher education quality assurance processes started with the accreditation processes of the Experimental Mechanism for Accreditation of University Degree Programmes (MEXA). ANEAES has also undergone external evaluation processes through the Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES). Between 2017 and 2018, it carried out the self-evaluation process and received a visit in 2019. The report concluded that the ANEAES is aligned with the RIACES good practice guidelines. Currently, the organization is conducting the self-evaluation process with the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

Peru

In 2006, through Law 28740, the National System of Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification of Educational Quality (by its Spanish acronym, SINEACE) was created, a body attached to the Ministry of Education whose function is to accredit institutions and programmes at all educational levels. According to the Law, SINEACE is a set of organisms, norms and procedures that establishes the criteria and standards for evaluation, accreditation and certification processes in order to ensure the basic levels of quality that educational institutions must provide. The Council for the Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification of the Quality of University Education (CONEAU) is the operating body in the field of university higher education.

In 2014, a new Law was passed through which a new university governance system was created, and the quality assurance system was reformed. This Law established a regulation model for universities in Peru. Therefore, new evaluation and accreditation mechanisms were established and gave rise to a process of reorganization of SINEACE. However, its regulation for operation is still pending.

In addition, this Law has created the National Superintendency of Higher University Education (SUNEDU), a specialized technical body, attached to the Ministry of Education. It seeks to conduct the evaluation process for licensing purposes of university higher education institutions, that is, to verify compliance with basic quality conditions and authorize operation. Its main purpose is to organize the university system after its institutional expansion and enrolment growth due to a 1997 regulation, which did not include mechanisms to guarantee compliance with a minimum quality threshold for new university institutions. This concern for quality led to the implementation of a Quality Assurance Policy for University Higher Education, which has licensing and accreditation as fundamental pillars, thus modifying previous criteria for priority-setting in licensing and control.

Due to this law enforcement, two new bodies for higher education quality were created: SUNEDU and SINEACE. SUNEDU is related to the new model for licensing new university and programmes and establishes its basic quality conditions. SINEACE deals with quality accreditation. The Ministry of Education is the governing body for university education and has replaced the National Association of Rectors (ANR), which granted licenses to create institutions, but did not carry out a comprehensive quality assessment. SUNEDU´s decision-

making body is the Board of Directors; the Minister designates the Superintendent, and the councillors are selected through public competitive procedures.

The licensing model establishes basic quality conditions that institutions must meet. The university is asked to furnish information for assessment. If the university meets certain conditions, a verification visit is made, and a technical licensing report is issued. The Board of Directors decides whether to grant the license or not. If the document analysis or the verification conducted during the visit shows that the university does not comply with the basic conditions, an adjustment plan is requested. The institution submits an action plan before going through the same procedure again. If the application is turned down, a closing process that can last up to two years, is initiated. During this lapse, university students are transferred to other university programmes.

According to the Law, SUNEDU also oversees the basic quality conditions that programmes must meet. Although oversight is mandatory for all undergraduate programmes, SUNEDU has decided to prioritize those having a greater impact on society. Thus, it has begun with the licensing of medical study programmes. Programmes submitted to licensing must have passed through the evaluation of their institutions to ensure that universities meet the minimum quality standards.

The licensing of institutions and programmes is SUNEDU´s function, whilst institutional and programme accreditation is undertaken through SINEACE, which is currently redefining its structure and evaluation process upon the new legal provisions. In addition, the institutional licensing carried out by SUNEDU has been prioritized as a precondition for institutional and programme accreditation processes.

External evaluation for institutional and programme accreditation is in charge of external evaluating entities, which are authorized and supervised by SINEACE. Institutions may choose a public or private evaluating entity, which has been established only for the purpose of carrying out the operational processes of the external evaluation of institutional or programme accreditation. These entities are not accrediting agencies, because they only conduct external evaluation processes. Both the criteria and procedures, the definition of standards for the accreditation of institutions and programmes, and the accreditation decisions correspond to SINEACE, which also guides the institutions during their self-assessment process.

SINEACE also authorizes and supervises entities that certify professional and occupational skills to recognize their quality level, regardless whether they have been acquired in the educational system or not. It is a voluntary certification, which is not binding for exercising the profession or occupation, so it is different from the professional degree qualification. Some of these entities are professional associations that carry out this function, which is authorized by SINEACE.

Pursuant to the new Law provisions, CONEAU is not operative. However, accreditation will continue within SINEACE´s scope. The system has an ad hoc Board of Directors made up of a president, a representative of the Ministry of Education, a representative of the National Council of Science, Technology and Technological Innovation, and the directorates of the organizations that are in charge of accreditation and the evaluation of basic and technical education, and the certification of professional and occupational skills in the country.

As prescribed by the 2006 Law, undergraduate programmes in the areas of health, education, and law must be mandatorily accredited. However, this obligation and its relationship with the licensing of programmes is being redefined; the status of programme accreditation that have already obtained the SUNEDU license must be considered. Until now, the accreditation of graduate programmes is voluntary, but the Law determines that, from SINEACE´s reform, it will be mandatory.

The licensing processes carried out by SUNEDU have no cost for the institutions. In the case of institutional and programme accreditation, the institution must pay for the costs of the external evaluation conducted by the evaluating entities, but SINEACE does not receive any fee.

The quality assurance system in Peru is being reorganized through the institution and programmes licensing and, at the same time, by the restructuring of SINEACE and the review of the accreditation processes. The Law approved in 2014 and the creation of SUNEDU entailed changes in the system, but the approval of a legal framework regulating SINEACE and the accreditation of institutions and programmes are still pending. For this reason, accreditation processes that began in 2006 are under review, prioritizing compulsory licensing to ensure a minimum quality of institutions and programmes.

Portugal

In Portugal, a new higher education quality assessment system was established by Law 38/2007. Pursuant to its provisions, Decree 369 in 2008 created the Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior (Portuguese abbreviation, A3ES).This new legal framework is aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, one of the action lines of the Bologna Process.

The function of the agency is to define and guarantee quality standards for higher education institutions and programmes and to promote the internationalization of Portuguese higher education. The agency is autonomous and is made up of a seven-member Board of Directors with executive functions. In addition, it has a Board of Curators which is the highest body that appoints the members of the Board of Directors. The Board of Trustees recommends about annual plans and reports, and the Board of Directors makes the decisions. The Council of Curators is made up of five members with experience in the area They are appointed by the Council of Ministers upon the proposal of the Minister responsible for the area of higher education. Directors have a five-year term of office.

Although the Law establishes standards and guidelines that the agency cannot ignore about the criteria that institutions and programmes must meet for their operation, these are defined by the agency, which ensures their compliance. Institutional accreditation is mandatory and has a six-year term. All the institutions have gone through a first cycle of institutional accreditation. Those that have obtained a negative decision were closed. According to regulations, the agency also grants accreditation for the operation of new higher education institutions.

Programme accreditation is also mandatory and is valid for six years. All programmes offered by universities must be accredited and public requests for accreditation are organized by discipline. The results obtained can be full accreditation, non-accreditation, or conditional accreditation for one, two or three years. When periods are over, institutions must submit a report to show that they have complied with the requested improvements.

 A full cycle of accreditation includes a five-year cycle of degree programme accreditation in all disciplines, followed by one year for institutional accreditation. After completing the first cycle of degree programme accreditation, the agency has devoted to

institutional accreditation for a year before starting with the second regular cycle of programme accreditation.

Among its functions, A3ES also certificates the internal quality assurance systems. Although the presentation is not obligatory for institutions, they are encouraged to certify their internal quality system to get benefits in the evaluation of their programmes, from the first to the second cycle. The second evaluation is less demanding for those institutions that have obtained a positive evaluation for their programmes in the first cycle, have a highly-qualified academic teaching staff, and research units evaluated by science and technology panels, and have a certificate for their internal quality systems.

The peer reviewer committees for degree programme evaluation are generally made up of five experts: two from the Portuguese academy of the disciplinary area, an international expert, a student representative, and a representative from the agency guiding the process. In the case of institutional evaluations, peer committees are made up of two members with a background in management positions but who are no longer in office. Although it is not a widespread practice, on exceptional occasions the Portuguese agency has requested collaboration from other agencies, for example, from the Vatican agency for theological degree programme evaluations.

The agency´s initial operation was financed by the State. Currently, accreditation processes have a cost for public or private institutions, which finances the agency operations. In 2007, the quality assurance system in Portugal was regulated by the Conselho Nacional de Avaliação do Ensino Superior (CNAVES), coordinated by the higher education institutions themselves.

A3ES is part of the European Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA), which represents the agencies of the member states of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), which includes quality assurance agencies operating in the EHEA that are considered solvent, trustworthy, and credible. Finally, the agency went through two external evaluation processes by ENQA in 2014 and 2019.

Spain

In Spain, the general coordination of the higher education system and the granting of official degrees correspond to the State. However, higher education institutions are regional[32] and are financed by the corresponding governments. A total of ten out of the seventeen autonomous communities in the country have regional agencies. These agencies are responsible for ensuring the quality of higher education in their communities.

Notwithstanding the regional character of the Spanish system, in 2002 the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (by its Spanish initials, ANECA) was created to contribute to enhance the quality of the higher education system by the evaluation, certification and accreditation of teaching, of teaching staff quality, and institutions. Apart from its role as a national agency, ANECA operates in those communities that do not have their own agency or for agencies not registered in the European Registry of Quality Agencies (EQAR), a necessary condition to operate as an accrediting agency for institutions and programmes.

Since 2014, ANECA has functioned as a public, autonomous body, attached to the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities. ANECA's Governing Council is made up of nine members. It includes the General-Secretary for Universities of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, who presides over it; the General Director of University Policy of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, who is its Vice President; and a representative from the autonomous administration with responsibility for university education. This member is appointed by the General Conference on University Policy, who is part of the Autonomous Communities for which ANECA is the external university evaluation body. ANECA is also made up of two university Rectors appointed by the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities, one of which must come from a University of a Community in which ANECA is the evaluation body, the Vice President of the Council of University Students of the State; a representative of the Social Councils, appointed by the Conference of Social Councils of Spanish Universities; a union representative of the university teaching and research staff; and a representative designated by the Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations. ANECA is organized in three areas: teaching and institutions, accreditation of teaching staff, and management (comprising

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[32] In Spain, there are only two national universities, the National Distance Education University (by its Spanish initials, UNED) and the Menéndez Pelayo International University, which offers only graduate level programmes.

both the human and material resources of the agency). The International Relations and Communication Unit and the Strategic Planning and Internal Quality Unit report directly to the Executive Directorate.

The coordination between ANECA and the regional agencies is carried out through the Spanish Network of University Quality Agencies (REACU), which coordinates the procedures stemming from the General Law. In REACU, both the regional agencies and ANECA have the same representation and the Secretariat of the network has a rotating position; decisions are taken collegially and by consensus. REACU´s agencies are: the Agency for the Catalonia Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya (by its Catalan initials, AQU, created in 1996), the Andalusian Agency of Knowledge (by its Spanish initials, DEVA-AAC, 2003), the Canary Agency for University Quality and Educational Evaluation (ACCUEE, 2002), the University Quality and Prospective Agency of Aragon (ACPUA, 2005), the Agency for the Quality of the University System of Castilla y León (ACSUCYL, 2001), the Agency for a Quality of the University System of Galicia (ACSUG, 2001), the Balearic Islands University Quality Agency (AQUIB, 2002), the Valencian Agency for Assessment and Prospective (AVAP, 2006), the Knowledge Foundation Madri+d (2014), the Euskal Unibertsitate Sistemaren Kalitate Agentzia (by its Basque acronym, UNIBASQ, 2004) and ANECA (2001).

The Council of Universities also participates in the assurance of higher education quality. It is made up of the university rectors and five members appointed by the head of the Ministry responsible for universities, who presides over it. Among its functions, it issues the resolutions about the compliance with and accreditation of study programmes once the agency evaluation reports are received. It also informs about the criteria for coordinating evaluation, certification, and accreditation activities.

In Spain, agencies carry out the evaluation of degree programmes, institutions and teaching staff. Although regional agencies also conduct the academic staff evaluation, its validation only applies to their territories. ANECA is the only body responsible for the validation of national evaluation, as well as for the accreditation of the academics´ research activities.

The evaluation, certification and accreditation of teaching activities, academic staff and institutions have no costs for universities. The agencies have budget allocations from the communities and, in the case of ANECA, from the national budget.

The accreditation of official degrees is mandatory, *ex-ante* and after its implementation. Undergraduate and doctoral degrees are accredited every six years and master's degrees every four years. It should be noted that in Spain universities may also grant their own degrees, which have no official recognition and are not subject to accreditation.

It is the Government responsibility to grant new degrees after a report submitted by the Council of Universities. This collegiate body supports the decisions of the agencies and, according to the European criteria, cannot change a negative report. It is also unlikely to modify a positive one.

The *ex-ante* verification of new degrees projects is exhaustive and also involves various aspects of the university accredited institution where they are granted. If the degree is not accredited, its negative aspects are pointed out so that the university can make the necessary amendments and resubmit the degree until it is accredited. Another possible outcome is partial accreditation, accompanied by an improvement plan that the university must implement within a set period.

For accreditation renewal, agencies appoint experts from the programme disciplinary area and committees are established by knowledge fields. A student also participates in them. Committees analyze all the degrees and make decisions for every programme; they pay a visit to the university and analyze the *ex-ante* report - which may contain recommendations- and the mandatory follow-up reports.

Only agencies that are in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) for Higher Education can carry out degree accreditations. There are three regional agencies that are not on this register, so the accreditation of degrees within these regions is carried out by ANECA. Although it is not a widespread practice, the Law allows degrees to be accredited with other European agencies if they are members of EQAR.

Within the framework of the institutional evaluation, ANECA has developed the AUDIT Program, which has promoted the development of internal quality assurance systems within university centres since 2007. The evaluation model is in line with the criteria and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The Agency provides the universities with support to comply with the recommendations established therein and certifies both the system designs and their implementation.

As of 2015, Royal Decree 420/15 on the creation, recognition, authorization and accreditation of universities and university centres, introduced in Spain the institutional accreditation of university centres as a complement to the accreditation of official university degrees. To be accredited, centres must have renewed the accreditation of 50% of their degrees and have certified the implementation of their Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS). This accreditation lasts for five renewable years and is applicable to all official university degrees offered in the centre.

The university must request the institutional accreditation of its centres from ANECA or the regional agency that is registered in the EQAR. The agency grants an evaluation report binding on the Council of Universities, which issues the accreditation resolution. The renewal of the accreditation of the centres or institutional re-accreditation must take place before the end of five years from the date of the first accreditation resolution. If the Council of Universities issues a resolution turning down the application, the university must resubmit the renewal of the accreditation for all its official degrees within a period not exceeding one year from the date of the resolution.

The AUDIT and institutional accreditation programmes are voluntary and are not under the legal provisions. However, they have brought about the establishment of quality assurance departments within Spanish universities.

The creation of public universities and the recognition of private universities are carried out by law, after a report submitted by the General Conference of University Policy, which may be favorable or unfavorable. The Conference is made up of the head of the Ministry of Education, who chairs it, the bodies responsible for university education of the Governing Councils of the Autonomous Communities and by five members appointed by the presidency of the Conference.

In Spain, quality assessment includes university teaching staff. Agencies carry out the evaluation of teachers and researchers. They need to have a favorable outcome to be able to get access to the position of *Profesor Titular de Universidad* (Senior Lecturer) or of *Catedrático de Universidad* (Professor). Agencies also conduct the evaluation of the research activities of university professors and researchers so that a productivity *bonus* for a six-year term -the so-called *sexenio*- is recognized. In the doctoral degree programmes, all the teaching staff must

hold a doctoral degree and at least 60% must have a background of an unexpired six-year term of research.

With the academic staff accreditation, the State evaluates teaching, research, and management, and defines the minimum levels that academic staff must achieve. Universities and the autonomous communities can conduct competitive recruitment processes for those positions. Within the framework of the accreditation of a programme, a certain number of accredited teaching staff is required as a guarantee of quality.

ANECA also carries out the evaluation of teachers who must validate their research performance every six years. The agency establishes criteria by area of knowledge, which are published annually in the official gazette and may become more restrictive from year to year.

Research accreditation is not mandatory for the academic staff; however, it is a requirement either to direct a doctoral dissertation or participate in competitive, merit-based examination boards.

The first quality agency in the country was the *Agencia per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya* (AQU Catalunya), which has its origin in a consortium established in 1996. With the approval of the Law of Universities in Catalonia in 2003, it has turned into the Catalan current agency. As it has been pointed out, most of the regional agencies were created between 2001 and 2004, a period in which the national agency, ANECA, was also established. Its functions were expanded in 2007 and it was given its definitive status as an Autonomous Body of the General State Administration in 2014.

Uruguay

The quality assurance system for higher education in Uruguay has undergone a recent transformation with the creation of the National Institute for Accreditation and Evaluation for Tertiary Education (by its Spanish acronym, INAEET). On January 8, 2020, Law 19852 was enacted, effective as of January 1, 2021. So far, the quality assurance system in Uruguay is being undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Culture, through an *ad hoc* Commission responsible for the implementation of the Regional Accreditation System of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), ARCU-SUR. Accreditation resolutions are issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture, although the Commission's decisions are binding on the Ministry. The Commission is made up of two members appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture, two by the University of the Republic and one by the Council of Rectors of Private Universities.

The Uruguayan university system is predominantly public: 85% of university enrolment is public. As mentioned, the recent Law has created the quality assurance body. INAEET will have a Board of Directors made up of nine regular members and nine alternates who will be appointed by the President of the Republic in agreement with the Minister of Education and Culture. Of these, five members and their alternates will be proposed by public tertiary institutions through the National System of Public Tertiary Education, three members and their alternates will be appointed by private tertiary institutions recognized or authorized to function as such through the Council of Rectors, and one member and his/her alternate will be proposed by the Ministry of Education and Culture, who will preside over it. The functions of the agency will be: to accredit public and private university and non-university tertiary education institutions that voluntarily submit themselves to the process, as well as their academic units and programmes; and develop institutional evaluation processes, their academic units and programmes at their request. The Law does not specify whether graduate degrees will be included.

INAEET will be responsible for setting accreditation standards and criteria in coordination with specialists appointed by tertiary education institutions and from the professional and academic fields. Accreditation will be granted for up to six-year terms. Although accreditation is voluntary, based on the evaluations carried out and the information provided by INAEET, procedures that accredited institutions will have to undergo before the

122

Ministry will be simplified or abbreviated with respect to those carried out by non-accredited institutions. These procedures will include the periodic information update and study programme modifications to incorporate changes identified in the accreditation process.

So far, the quality assurance system operates under the ARCU-SUR Regional Accreditation System and the standards used for the accreditation of programmes are those approved by this System. ARCU-SUR accreditation is also voluntary. Almost all the undergraduate degrees in the Engineering area obtained the ARCU-SUR accreditation, thus consolidating a culture of quality and evaluation. Regarding costs, at present institutions must cover the expenses for the evaluators' fees under the ARCU-SUR system.

The Consultative Council for Private Tertiary Education (CCETP) is another body that plays a key role in the quality assurance of higher education in Uruguay. It is made up of seven regular members: two representatives of the Ministry, three representatives of the University of the Republic (UDELAR), two representatives of private universities and one representative of the National Administration of Public Education (ANEP). This body deals with the creation of new public and private institutions and study programmes, as well as the assurance of university quality. The criteria for the licensing of institutions are regulated by Decree 104/14, which establishes mainly qualitative approaches and very exhaustive guidelines.

The first authorization is temporary and is valid for five years. The Council conducts an annual follow-up, and, after that period, they are re-evaluated. Evaluation of those institutions or study programmes that are less than twenty years old takes place every three years, and every five years for those that are older than that. When an institution does not meet the minimum requirements for operation, it is closed. Study programmes may also be closed when they depart from the initial conditions in which they were enabled to operate.

Venezuela

In 2002, the Ministry of Popular Power for University Education (by its Spanish initials, MPPEU) was established with the aim of coordinating the national higher education system, as well as standardizing and articulating institution objectives and quality. In 2008, MPPEU created the University Evaluation, Monitoring and Accreditation System (SESU) to guarantee the quality of institutions and programmes, both public and private, through their evaluation, monitoring and accreditation, in accordance with a set of criteria and indicators of relevance, pertinence and quality. To conduct these processes, that same year, according to Official Gazette 39032, the National Committee for Evaluation and Accreditation of University Education Programmes and Institutions (CEAPIES) was created.

CEAPIES seeks to coordinate the evaluation and accreditation processes of institutions and programmes; recognize university degrees, according to agreements and State policies on university education, and coordinate with international accreditation processes within the framework of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). It is made up of twenty-seven university or academic professors with renowned expertise in teaching activities, as well as in scientific and intellectual production. Their appointment is based on the criteria of gender equity, profession, areas of knowledge, and geographic location, according to territorialization policies established by MPPEU.

CEAPIES has participated in the ARCU-SUR System and the Network of National Accreditation Agencies of MERCOSUR (by its Spanish acronym, RANA) from its inception until 2014. After that date, it has had no activities.

In addition, the National Council of Universities (CNU), the governing body of the higher education system attached to the Ministry, is made up of more than forty members with right to vote and six with voice. CNU is chaired by MPPEU and is made up of the rectors of national and private universities; three student representatives, two professors appointed by the Congress of the Republic; and a representative of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Research (CONICIT). CNU is in charge of approving projects for the creation of new public or private universities, institutes and colleges. In addition, it must establish the requirements for the creation, elimination or modification of departments, schools, or institutes of all universities, as well as to approve the corresponding applications. At present, CNU is

124

seeking to create a new university evaluation, supervision, support and accreditation system, but this process is still under discussion.

As it was not possible to support with primary sources the information provided about the process of higher education quality assurance in the country, data and facts collected in this section come from bibliographic reviews and other secondary sources.
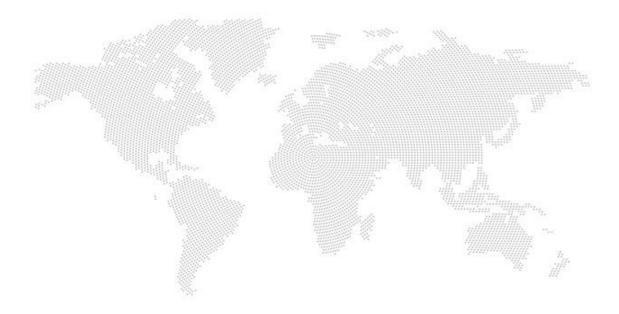
TABLE 9

Evaluation
Object and mandatory or voluntary processes of national QA systems

Country	Ex -ante evaluation	Ex -post evaluation	Undergraduate programmes	Graduate programmes	SIGC	Student learning	Academic staff	Professional qualification	Private agencies	SIED
ANDORRA	Not defined by law	Institutional evaluation defined by law (recently created agency). Actions aimed at strengthening HEIs internal quality assurance systems	Compulsory for programmes that grant official degrees, of all disciplines	Compulsory for official programmes: masters and doctoral programmes	X		X			
ARGENTINA	The agency recommends the Ministry of Education the creation of new private university institutions.	Mandatory institutional evaluation. University institutions must carry out self-evaluation processes complemented by external evaluations every six years. SIED	Compulsory for programmes defined as of public interest by the Ministry of Education	Compulsory for all programmes: specializations, master´s and doctoral programmes					Prescribed by law	X
BOLIVIA	The agency is not expected to operate in the licensing of new private HEIs	It does not carry out institutional evaluation or accreditation. In 2000, it implemented a term programme to accredit the quality of private higher education institutions.	Evaluation is voluntary for programmes through the ARCU-SUR regional system	The agency is not expected to accredit graduate programmes.						

Country	Ex -ante evaluation	Ex -post evaluation	Undergraduate programmes	Graduate programmes	SIGC	Student learning	Academic staff	Professional qualification	Private agencies	SIED
BRAZIL	INEP recommends the Ministry of Education on the licensing of new private HEIs	Compulsory institutional accreditation	Compulsory for programmes defined by the Ministry of Education	Compulsory for all master's and doctoral programmes		X				
CHILE	CNA, a body that, together with the agency, is part of SINACES, it licenses new private HEIs	Compulsory institutional accreditation	Compulsory for programmes in the areas of health and pedagogy. Voluntary for the rest of the disciplinary areas	Compulsory for Doctoral programmes. Voluntary for master's and health specialties (graduates who work in the public sector must have graduated from an accredited programme)						
COLOMBIA	CONACES Rooms for Institutional Procedures recommends the Ministry of Education on the creation of new private HEIs	Voluntary institutional accreditation of programmes	Voluntary for programmes, without distinction of disciplinary areas	Voluntary. Accreditation of medical specialties, masters and doctoral studies						
COSTA RICA	CONESUP is in charge of licensing new private HEIs.	It does not perform institutional evaluation	Voluntary evaluation of programmes without distinction of disciplinary area	Voluntary accreditation of professional master's degrees, academic master's degrees, and doctoral programmes						

Country	Ex -ante evaluation	Ex -post evaluation	Undergraduate programmes	Graduate programmes	SIGC	Student learning	Academic staff	Professional qualification	Private agencies	SIED
CUBA	The Ministry of Higher Education authorizes the new public HEIs. Voluntary	Voluntary institutional evaluation with a result that grants the category of qualified, certified or of excellence	Voluntary for programmes without distinction of disciplinary area	Voluntary. Accreditation of specialties, master's, and doctoral degrees (the Ministry may require closure of a non-accredited program)		x				
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC	CONESCyT is responsible of the authorization for opening and implementing new institutions	The recently created agency will take over voluntary institutional accreditation	The agency has not initiated yet accreditation for undergraduate programmes	The agency does not accredit graduate programmes					Prescribed by law	
ECUADOR	The agency recommends the Higher Education Council the licensing of new private HEIs	Compulsory institutional accreditation	Compulsory for all programmes by law. Only those corresponding to public calls have been accredited	The Law establishes the compulsory accreditation of all graduate programmes, but it has not been carried out yet		x		x		
EL SALVADOR	The evaluation for the authorization of new private HEIs corresponds to the Ministry of Education	It is expected to implement mandatory institutional accreditation	There is no accreditation of undergraduate programmes	The agency does not accredit graduate programmes						

Country	Ex -ante evaluation	Ex -post evaluation	Undergraduate programmes	Graduate programmes	SIGC	Student learning	Academic staff	Professional qualification	Private agencies	SIED
PANAMA	The agency recommends the Ministry of Education the licensing of new private institutions.	Compulsory institutional accreditation for institutions operating for at least eight-years. Voluntary for institutions below this term.	Voluntary for at least two programmes of disciplines under request. Voluntary accreditation for the rest of the programmes publicly called.	Accreditation is mandatory by law, but is has not been conducted yet						
PARAGUAY	The agency recommends the Ministry of Education the licensing of new private institutions	Voluntary institutional accreditation and evaluation	Mandatory for medical specialties. engineering and those whose exercise may endanger health and personal property	Mandatory for medical specialties. Voluntary for master´s and doctoral programmes						
PERU	SUNEDU is responsible for the licensing of new HEIs	Licensing is mandatory to ensure minimum quality levels. It is overseen by a special body. Voluntary institutional accreditation conducted by the agency (it is being restructured, and evaluation processes are under review)	Mandatory for health, education, and law programmes (under review because they must conduct programme licensing). Voluntary for the rest	Voluntary. Master´s degrees and doctoral programmes (under review since SINEACE´s reform)				X	Evaluation bodies	
PORTUGAL	The agency accredits new private HEIs	Compulsory institutional accreditation. Voluntary certification of internal quality assurance systems	Compulsory for all programmes regardless of their disciplinary area	Compulsory for all master´s and doctoral programmes	X					

Country	Ex -ante evaluation	Ex -post evaluation	Undergraduate programmes	Graduate programmes	SIGC	Student learning	Academic staff	Professional qualification	Private agencies	SIED
GUATEMALA	No agency has been created CEPS authorizes new private universities	No Institutional evaluation is planned as a function for a national agency	No accreditation for undergraduate programmes is planned as a function of a national agency	No accreditation for graduate programmes is planned as a function of a national agency						
HONDURAS	The evaluation for the licensing of new private HEIs corresponds to the Council of Higher Education.	Institutional accreditation has just started. Although it is mandatory, only some institutions have submitted for institutional accreditation.		The agency does not have the function of accrediting graduate programmes						
MÉXICO	SEP, the Education Secretaries of the Federative Entities, and the Autonomous Universities license the new HEIs programmes	Voluntary institutional accreditation	Voluntary accreditation for programmes in all disciplinary areas programme licensing). Voluntary for the rest	Voluntary. Master´s degrees and doctoral programmes (under review since SINEACE´s reform)		X			X	

Country	Ex -ante evaluation	Ex -post evaluation	Undergraduate programmes	Graduate programmes	SIGC	Student learning	Academic staff	Professional qualification	Private agencies	SIED
NICARAGUA	The National Council of Universities authorizes the new HEIs	The mandatory institutional accreditation has just started. It is expected that the National Assembly may order the closure of institutions not meeting the minimum quality standards.	Degree programme accreditation has not yet begun.	The agency does not accredit graduate programmes.						
SPAIN	Parliaments of autonomous communities create public and private universities upon a report from the General Conference on University Policy.	Voluntary. Institutional accreditation of university centres. Certification of internal quality assurance systems	Compulsory for programmes that grant official degrees, of all disciplines	Compulsory for official programmes: master`s and doctoral degrees	X		X			
URUGUAY	The Consultative Council for Private Tertiary Education (CCETP) authorizes the new private HEIs	The Agency is not under operation yet, but it is expected to conduct voluntary accreditation for voluntary university and non-university HEIs.	Voluntary for programmes under ARCU SUR regional system	The agency does not accredit graduate programmes						
VENEZUELA	The National Council of Universities is responsible for the authorization of new private HEIs.									

ACRONYMS AND INITIALISMS

ACRONYM/ INITIALISM	SPANISH (or other languages stated in brackets)
A3ES	Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior – Portugal (Portuguese)
ACAAI	Agencia Centroamericana de Acreditación de Programas de Arquitectura y de Ingeniería
ACCUEE	Agencia Canaria de Calidad Universitaria y Evaluación Educativa
ACPUA	Agencia de Calidad y Prospectiva Universitaria de Aragón
ACSUCYL	Agencia para la Calidad del Sistema Universitario de Castilla y León
ACSUG	Axencia para a Calidade do Sistema Universitario de Galicia (Galician)
ADACES	Agencia Dominicana para el Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior - Rep. Dominicana
ANEAES	Agencia Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación de la Educación Superior - Paraguay
ANECA	Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación - Spain
APEAESU	Agencia Plurinacional de Evaluación y Acreditación de la Educación Superior Universitaria - Bolivia
APQN	Asia-Pacific Quality Network (English)- Región Asia Pacífico
AQU	Agencia per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitario de Catalunya (Catalan)
AQUA	Agencia de Qualitat de l'Ensenyament Superior D'Andorra (Catalan)
AQUIB	Agencia de Qualitat Universitaria de les Illes Balears (Catalan)
ARCU-SUR	Sistema de Acreditación Regional de Carreras Universitarias - Mercosur
AVAP	Agencia Valenciana d'Avaluacio i Prospectiva (Valencian)
CACES	Consejo de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior - Ecuador
CAPES	Fundação Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brazil (Portuguese)
CCA	Consejo Centroamericano de Acreditación de la Educación Superior - Centroamérica
CdA	Comisión de Acreditación de la Calidad de la Educación Superior - El Salvador
CENEVAL	Centro Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación Superior - Mexico
CIEES	Comités Interinstitucionales para la Evaluación de la Educación Superior - Mexico
CNA	Comisión Nacional de Acreditación - Chile
CNA	Consejo Nacional de Acreditación - Colombia
CNACU	Comisión Nacional de Acreditación de Carreras Universitarias - Bolivia
CNEA	Consejo Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación - Nicaragua
CONACES	Comisión Nacional Intersectorial de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior - Colombia
CONACYT	Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología - Mexico
CONAES	Comisión Nacional de Educación Superior – Brazil
CONEAU	Comisión Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria - Argentina
CONEAUPA	Consejo Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación de la Educación Superior Universitaria de Panama
COPAES	Consejo para la Acreditación de la Educación Superior - Mexico
DEVA-AAC	Agencia Andaluza del Conocimiento
ENADE	Exame Nacional de Desempenho dos Estudantes – Brazil (Portuguese)
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (Asociación Europea de Agencias de Garantía de Calidad) (English)

EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (Registro Europeo de Agencias de Calidad Universitaria) (English)
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (English)
HCÉRES	Haut Conseil de l'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur – Francia (French)
IESALC	Instituto Internacional para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe - UNESCO
INAEET	Instituto Nacional de Acreditación y Evaluación de la Educación Terciaria - Uruguay
INEP	Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira – (Brazil) (Portuguese)
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (Red Internacional de Agencias de Garantía de Calidad en Educación Superior) (English)
JAN	Junta de Acreditación Nacional - Cuba
MEC	Ministerio de Educación y Cultura - Uruguay
MERCOSUR	Mercado Común del Sur
MEXA	Mecanismo Experimental de Acreditación del MERCOSUR
OCTS	Observatorio Iberoamericano de la Ciencia, la Tecnología y la Sociedad de la OEI
OEI	Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency – United Kingdom (English)
RANA	Red de Agencias Nacionales de Acreditación -
REACU	Red Española de Agencias de Calidad Universitaria
Red INDICES	Red Iberoamericana de Indicadores de Educación Superior
RIACES	Red Iberoamericana de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior
SDG	Strategic Development Goals (Agenda de Desarrollo Sustentable - Naciones Unidas) (English)
SHACES	Comisión Nacional de Acreditación de la Calidad de la Educación Superior - Honduras
SIACES	Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento de la Calidad en Educación Superior
SINACES	Sistema Nacional de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior - Chile
SINAES	Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior - Costa Rica
SINAES	Sistema Nacional de Avalia^ao da Educad Superior – Brazil) (Portuguese)
SINEACE	Sistema Nacional de Evaluación, Acreditación y Certificación de la calidad Educativa - Peru
UNEDU	Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Superior Universitaria - Peru
UNIBASQ	Euskal Unibertsitate Sistemaren Kalitate Agentzia (Basque)