

Regarding the exporting potential of institutions, over the past decade some Latin American countries have targeted the Spanish-speaking migrant populations in the United States. Institutions from Puerto Rico, for example, have set up learning centers in Miami and Orlando for the Hispanic community of Florida. Various initiatives have sought to bolster the participation rate among the Hispanic population, which overall is underrepresented in US higher education.

The vast majority of transnational provision in the region is at the postgraduate level, in some cases due to national regulations. However, there appears to be a growing transnational

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market for upper-level technical university preparation and professional degrees. The main language of instruction is Spanish. The most common subject areas are economics and business administration. There are very few external providers offering courses in resource-intensive areas such as health sciences, engineering, or technology. Overall, transnational providers appear to be focused on offering courses with minimal costs and maximum output. From this viewpoint, although it serves to satisfy some unmet demand, transnational delivery also exacerbates the enrollment imbalance in the region.

EMERGING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Over the past five years, the rise in external tertiary providers has inspired largely controversial discussions about the developmental impact, in the region, of foreign education activity. There have been repeated claims about the “McDonaldization” of higher education, but little data have been collected to validate or refute these opinions. Some countries have been characterized by a *laissez-faire* approach to foreign institutions, while others have shaped the sector as less of an open market for external providers. A dichotomy, then, has emerged between the regional countries for and against the import of transnational higher education, in many cases creating a fragmented, ambiguous, and controversial environment for external institutions seeking to operate in the region.

Some changes in outlook are under way concerning cross-border education. It is evident that the quality assurance of foreign institutions will remain a top priority on the regional policymaking agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean for years to come. Future innovations could include monitoring the projects of networks that are assuming accreditation and

quality assurance roles. The development of clearly defined national regulations and regional accreditation mechanisms could also help to dissuade less-committed foreign players, while improving official oversight of transnational higher education and public perceptions of this type of provision.

Author's note: This article highlights the key research findings of an extensive study undertaken (in Spanish) by UNESCO's International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) on the transnationalization of tertiary education across the region. For further details, please refer to the report “Foreign Education Activity in Latin America and the Caribbean: Key Issues, Regulation and Impact” at www.obhe.ac.uk. ■

Quality Assurance in Colombia

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Quality assurance of higher education has been a concern in Colombia since the 1960s when, pressed by the overwhelming creation of programs and institutions, a legal project to create an accreditation system was drafted. The project did not become a law; but further efforts, the most important a decree in 1980 and a law in 1992, produced today's complex system of quality assurance.

Currently, the Colombian government exercises control in higher education through the tasks of inspection and surveillance. The Ministry of Education authorizes the start-up of new programs and institutions and imposes administrative penalties on institutions that break the law. Academic peers have gained influence in the system, and today they have a significant role in the evaluation process.

INSTITUTIONAL AND PROGRAM EVALUATION

Evaluation is carried out at three levels—institutions, programs, and students. The establishment of a new public or private higher education institution starts with the application, consisting of several documents related to academic, legal, and financial requirements; followed by the evaluation by a group of consultants, hired by the Ministry of Education, and a group of academic peers designated by CONACES (the Inter-institutional National Commission for the Quality Assurance of Higher Education), which is a collegiate body formed by scholars and organized by areas of knowledge; and finishes with the decision issued by the Ministry of Education. When the deci-

sion is positive, the new institution is allowed to operate without a time limit.

Before beginning operations, every academic program, at both graduate and undergraduate levels, must obtain government authorization, called “qualified registration,” and must be included in the National Information System for Higher Education. Qualified registration certifies the fulfillment of minimum conditions of quality. The process to obtain this authorization includes academic peers’ evaluation; a concept by CONACES, based on the peers’ report; and the formal authorization of the program by the Ministry of Education. The qualified registration is granted for a seven-year period, and it is required for seeking accreditation.

Accreditation is voluntary and is granted for a period of 4, 7, or 10 years to programs and institutions that demonstrate their excellence in academic and administrative issues. Managed by the National Accreditation Council (CNA), the accreditation process includes application, evaluation of initial conditions, self-study, on-site evaluation by peers, and a final concept issued by the CNA to the Ministry of Education, which issues a resolution recognizing the accreditation. Since accreditation is linked to the idea of continuous improvement, self-evaluation and external evaluation are aimed at producing corrective voluntary actions.

There are 4,432 graduate programs authorized, and from these, only 369 (8 percent) have been accredited. CNA is the only accreditation agency in the country; however, institutions may apply for accreditation with foreign agencies. These other accreditations do not have relevance in the country, yet they can be used for marketing purposes and to facilitate international recognition.

The existence of two different procedures related to programs and institutions (authorization and accreditation) creates a double filter aimed at improving quality. Nevertheless, given the differing numbers of authorized and accredited programs, clearly a reexamination is called for of these two processes that sometimes duplicate requests of information and may produce conflicting results. Recent efforts to reduce this risk have been carried out, but it is still a reason for concern.

STUDENT EVALUATION

Students are evaluated twice by the state—before the beginning of their higher education and then before its completion. There are antecedents of a general admissions test from 1934. However, the current version of the higher education admissions test can be traced back to 1980; it is called the Exam for Access to Higher Education and it is typically scheduled at the end of 11th grade, the last grade of high school. Most higher education institutions use these results as a criterion in the admissions process, while the government uses them to collect information on students’ level of knowledge as well as to gather demographic information.

The second test is called Exam of Quality of Higher

Education (ECAES). Since 2002 the test has been assigned to the students who are in the last two semesters of every academic program. ECAES is obligatory but it is not a requirement to obtain an undergraduate degree. However, some institutions have defined minimum scores in this test as a requisite for graduation.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND AUTONOMY

An ongoing debate continues on whether quality assurance, as conducted by the government and supported in the academic community, violates the constitutional guarantee for universities’ autonomy. People who believe that the policy does not violate institutional autonomy consider that it is part of the constitutional obligation of the government to oversee higher education’s quality. Others believe that the mere fact of authorizing (or denying authorization to) a university to offer a program violates its autonomy.

Student evaluation has also been accused of violating universities’ autonomy, since the content of the exam is based on a homogeneous body of knowledge, methodologies, and contents. The government and people who support this evaluation assume that a common denomination (e.g., medicine, law,

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engineering, etc.) implies a minimum set of common knowledge and skills that are evaluated in these exams.

CONCLUSION

The great complexity of this quality assurance system is its main strength, as well as its weakness. The sustainability of the system currently depends on the ministry’s efficiency, although ministries are not supposed to carry out such operational tasks. To be able to handle its current level of complexity, the Colombian system will have to decentralize many of the procedures currently concentrated in its Ministry of Education. It is imperative to simplify the programs’ and institutions’ evaluation process, by focusing on the essential characteristics and indicators of each kind of evaluation as well as on widening the gap between the authorization and accreditation processes. The tension between governmental control and universities’ autonomy will continue. However, the growing demand for accountability will provide the government with stronger arguments to exercise its control over higher education. ■