

Accreditation in Colombia: Achievements and Challenges

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In the 1990s, Latin American quality-assurance systems began to appear in the context of increased enrollment, specifically in private higher education. The explosion of questionable reputation institutions and programs was massive. Due to this, countries as Chile, Mexico, and Colombia began to develop their own quality-assurance systems at a time when the priority of public policy was on expanding enrollment, but quality had been neglected. In 1992, Colombian Congress issued Law 30, which governs the Colombian higher education system and established the national system of accreditation. Compared to other countries of Latin America, in Colombia accreditation was not intended to be mandatory nor to establish minimum requirements for degree offerings. According to Law 30, accreditation was “to guarantee that Colombian educational institutions meet the highest quality requirements and fulfill their purposes and objectives.” The process of accreditation was determined to be voluntary and managed by the National Council of Accreditation (CNA)—and its result was temporary.

At the time, the best universities of the nation saw accreditation as an opportunity to establish a mechanism of social accountability based mainly on

external evaluations undertaken by academic peers. Noted equally was the need to establish a rigorous evaluation model that would recognize institutions and programs with the highest standards, as at the time there was a wide variety of educational offers of dubious quality.

The academic community became involved in designing the model, which led to its support and endorsement. In 1995, the National Council of Accreditation started to function and divulged the guidelines for academic program accreditation. In 1997, the first programs were accredited, and by 2001 the guidelines for institutional accreditation were determined. However, by design, the accreditation system focused on “high quality,” but there was no established policy to evaluate minimum quality conditions. In the mid-1990s the government established the criteria and process of obtaining mandatory authorization for all academic programs, which was called *Registro Calificado*. Through this process the National Intersectional Commission for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CONACES) was formed, which is responsible for assessing and granting the authorization. As a result, a multilevel Quality Assurance System was established, currently complemented by the Labor Observatory for Education (OLE), the National System of Information (SNIES), and mandated testing of incoming and graduating students.

It is worth mentioning that compared to the other Latin America countries, the Colombian system, specially the accreditation, has an interesting international position and has become an essential reference for countries beginning to implement systems of quality assurance like Peru and Ecuador.

STRENGTHS, DANGERS, AND CHALLENGES

Twenty years after the emergence of the quality-assurance system, it is necessary to identify the contributions of the accreditation process toward the development of higher education in the country. Specifically, this implies checking accreditation's coherence and efficiency in this system.

Recently, I interviewed eight leaders and experts within the Colombian higher education system: four presidents of prestigious universities; two founding members, and the current coordinator of the National Council of Accreditation; and an external evaluator and international expert on issues of higher education quality assurance in Latin America. The purpose of the inquiry was to explore whether the accreditation had fulfilled its purposes throughout the past 20 years.

In general terms, the interviewed leaders are satisfied with the results of the accreditation system. If the institutions are private or public, they concur that a "culture of self-evaluation," without losing the sense of autonomy valued in higher education, has emerged to help solidify planning and decision-making processes. They add that with few exceptions, the external peer evaluation process has been positive for Colombian universities, as they have helped to strengthen national academic communities beyond regions, and institutional types. They also agree that the mandates of the National Council of Accreditation have been transparent and academically grounded and that the system is consistent as demonstrated by its results. They also perceive that even the institutions that are not accredited recognize the legitimacy of the model and aspire to meet the required standards.

Regarding challenges and dangers the system could face, the leaders expressed concern about the influence of politics, bureaucracy, and official pressure to accelerate the fulfillment of government goals in relation to the number of accredited institutions and programs, which would defeat the initial purpose. The majority of the respondents argue that, besides public recognition, there are not enough governmental incentives for accredited institutions. In addition, a problem involves a lack of policies to generate new funding for costly improvement processes.

Finally, it is essential to note that, regardless of a robust accreditation system, key indicators for higher education quality in Colombia continue to be weak in the Latin American context. For example, only 6 percent of professors in Colombia have doctoral degrees. Also, with few exceptions, higher education institutions have not implemented strong reforms to modernize curricula and strengthen the use of technology to support university teaching. Therefore, it is not surprising to find few accredited programs and institutions; only 10 percent of the institutions has achieved this excellence standard. In order to increase accreditation it is necessary for institutions to understand and enact their intended purpose.

CONCLUSION

Currently, it is necessary to continue strengthening the accreditation system, while keeping in mind that accreditation is a means—not an end in itself. Given its purpose to assure “high quality,” accreditation should drive institutional change. Up to this point, much of the effort of the government has been aimed at strengthening the mandatory authorization in order to properly fulfill its role of

inspection and oversight. In this scenario, accreditation could become a formality without real consequences. Therefore, it is necessary to advance the articulation of the quality-assurance system, taking advantage of the legitimacy gained by the accreditation process. To do this, it is necessary to evaluate processes and inputs, and, more importantly, results such as student learning outcomes.

Additionally, more stimuli are required. Complete autonomy, for example, should be reserved only for accredited institutions. Also, it is necessary to establish competitive funding for institutions that are involved in accreditation; and financial aid, subsidized by the government for students from lower socioeconomic levels, should target those entering accredited programs.

During the last 10 years, the rate of students attending Latin American higher education institutions has significantly increased according to official figures. It is now the time to concentrate on quality, thus, preventing frustrations for new students and society as a whole. In Colombia, as one of the most successful models in Latin America, the accreditation system has a great opportunity to lead quality assurance in higher education and to foster an authentic approach of qualitative improvement. Hopefully, such opportunity will not be lost in the years to come.