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## Colombia in the International development of high quality accreditation in higher Education

Colombia en el desarrollo Internacional de Acreditación de alta calidad en Educación superior

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### RESUMEN

**Palabras clave:**

Acreditación (educación),  
Calidad de la educación,  
Desarrollo de la educación,  
Enseñanza superior

La acreditación de alta calidad de la educación superior surge en Estados Unidos y se lleva a cabo, a partir de los años sesenta, en otros países. En Colombia tales procesos se desarrollan desde los años noventa, aunque se reconocen actividades similares a lo largo del siglo XX. Como objetivo, este artículo de reflexión analiza el lugar de Colombia en el desenvolvimiento internacional de la acreditación de la calidad en la educación superior. Para ello, desde el enfoque cualitativo hermenéutico, se realiza una reflexión crítica y de contraste de las características en los procesos de acreditación en Colombia con respecto a otros países de América y Europa. En los resultados se expone el nacimiento de la acreditación en Estados Unidos y valores subyacentes de calidad en Colombia a principios del siglo XX, las características iniciales de la evaluación de la educación superior en América Latina y valores subyacentes de la calidad en Colombia hasta los años ochenta, y la acreditación en Colombia, América Latina y Europa con un breve contraste entre agencias. Como conclusión, se reconoce la calidad del Consejo Nacional de Acreditación para equilibrar los procesos globales de acreditación con los problemas sociales y culturales propios de las instituciones de educación superior del país.

### ABSTRACT

**Keywords:**

Accreditation (education),  
Quality of education,  
Development of education,  
Higher education

High-quality accreditation of higher education emerges in the United States and develops, some time later, in other countries. In Colombia, such processes have been evident since the 1990s, although similar activities have been recognized throughout the 20th century. As an objective, this reflective article analyzes the place of Colombia in the international development of quality accreditation in higher education. To do this, from the qualitative hermeneutic approach, a critical reflection and contrast of the characteristics in the accreditation processes in Colombia with respect to other countries in America and Europe is carried out. The results expose the birth of accreditation in the United States and the underlying values of quality in Colombia at the beginning of the 20th century, the initial characteristics of the evaluation of higher education in Latin America and the underlying values of quality in Colombia up to the years eighties, and accreditation in Colombia, Latin America and Europe with a brief contrast between agencies. In conclusion, the quality of the National Accreditation Council is recognized to balance the global accreditation processes with the social and cultural problems of the country's higher education institutions.

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## Introduction

High-quality accreditation in higher education has been a constantly developing topic. Since the beginning of the 20th century (Woodhouse, 2013; International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2020) and from a global perspective, ways and criteria have been proposed to assess the relevance of higher education programmes and institutions in reference to what is conceptualised, defined and agreed as excellence. Colombia, in this purpose, participates as a State guarantor of quality in higher education since the early nineties with the issuance of the Political Constitution of that time and, especially, with Law 30 of 1992, although underlying criteria and values on such processes are already evident since the thirties of the twentieth century .

Currently, high quality accreditation in higher education can be understood, at the global level, as an alternative to achieve the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, as set out by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020). The UNDP sees education as a foundation for building equitable, sustainable and prosperous societies. The understanding of education as a pillar for a better society makes sense in light of figures from the World Bank (2016) on unemployment and youth dropout rates. In 2016, Latin America has twenty million young people who neither work nor study, known as "ninis". The following year, the Universidad del Rosario published a study on youth inactivity in Colombia; the number of "ninis" reached 580,000 (Ospina et al., 2017).

The causes of this situation are diverse, including a lack of resources and negative perceptions of education and its profitability. The solutions to the problem always lie in education, specifically in the supply and quality of education. According to Misión de Sabios (2019), "education has shown to be a critical factor for human development and the effective transformation of societies and will be even more so in the context of accelerated technological

change" (p. 10). The Colombian state has as its goal, based on Law 30 of 1992, to provide a quality service in higher education, which refers to good academic results, adequate infrastructure and relevance in means and processes.

Within this framework of tension between the global and the national, the need arises to analyse the impact of high quality in Colombia and, in particular, in certain regions of the country where there have been no consolidated studies on educational quality and, therefore, no analysis of the characteristics of high quality accreditation processes and their impact on future professionals. Given these circumstances, it has been proposed to analyse the impact of quality in higher education between 1990 and 2020, taking as a reference the evaluation model of the National Accreditation Council (CNA), which is necessary to ensure equal access for men and women to high quality technical, technological and university education.

In order to achieve this aim, this article first and foremost, and as a specific objective, carries out a documentary review of high quality accreditation processes in higher education in Europe, America and, principally, Colombia. It begins with questions about the origin of accreditation, the evolution of this process and the policies and agencies that have governed accreditation practices in Europe, Latin America and Colombia. In this way, the particularities of the national model are understood.

Thus, this article presents the partial results of a general investigation based on a three-section chapter structure. Firstly, the methodology used is described, based on theories of social research; then, the results are presented, with emphasis on historical processes of quality accreditation in higher education and the particularities of the Colombian CNA as a model of accreditation, in contrast to other agencies and practices in Europe and America. Finally, it reflects on the characteristics of the Colombian model in relation to other accreditation systems.

## Materials and Methods

The methodology used to fulfil the first objective of the research is framed within the hermeneutic paradigm of the social sciences (González, 2003), due to its analytical nature of legal and historical texts on accreditation and high quality processes in higher education. At the same time, it is approached from a qualitative focus (Niño, 2011), in that it seeks analytical depth rather than numerical breadth. It does not, therefore, proceed to carry out statistical studies on the information collected, but rather to interpret phenomena associated with higher education accreditation in Colombia, in contrast with corresponding aspects in other countries in Europe or on the same continent.

To carry out this hermeneutic process, the sequence proposed by Uribe (2013) is followed: firstly, a search is carried out for historical and state documents on accreditation in higher education, both in Colombia and in Europe, the United States and Latin America; secondly, the information read is described and catalogued in bibliographic organisation tables in order to select both the texts and the most appropriate categories for the fulfilment of the specific objective; thirdly, the information is analysed by means of a comparative study. In this respect, Kohn (1987) proposes four types of research in the systematic contrast of nations, according to the function they fulfil: nation as object, nation as context of study, nation as unit of analysis and nation as part of the international system. In the case of the research presented here, the nation is taken as the context of study, i.e. "the focus is on the evaluation of generalisations concerning the way in which certain institutions operate or the way in which certain social structures impact on subjects" (Archenti & Piovani, 2018, p. 314).

The contrasts between how higher education accreditation processes have developed in Colombia and how they have been carried out in other parts of the world lead to the recognition of three essential categories for analysis, which arise from the technique

(Ocampo, 2018) or strategy (Valbuena, 2013) known as content analysis: (a) Birth of accreditation in the United States and underlying values of quality in Colombia in the early 20th century, (b) Initial characteristics of higher education evaluation in Latin America and underlying values of quality in Colombia until the 1980s, and (c) Accreditation in Colombia, Latin America and Europe: brief contrast between agencies. The identification of such categories determines the success of such an analytical approach, as stated by Ocampo (2018):

(...)This is a key issue in this research technique, as the selection and classification of the information sought depends on the determination of the categories. This is so much the case that Berelson states that the success or failure of content analysis depends on its categories. (p. 190)

General social research methodology is related, for the purposes of this article, to the more particular processes of historical comparison. Elliott (1999) uses the term "historical provisionalism" to refer to the priority given in historical research to the study of national phenomena, without the corresponding relationships with similar phenomena in the international sphere. Caballero (2015) considers this way of proceeding to be limited to the extent that "there is a tendency to perceive national history as unique and, to this extent, to interpret its processes in exceptional terms" (p. 51).

Bloch (1999) and Kocka (2002) agree on the teleology of historical comparison: to explain the differences and similarities between phenomena, experiences, institutions or processes in two or more social environments. In the case of the research presented in this article, we proceed, precisely, to find similarities and divergences between the processes of accreditation of high quality in higher education in Colombia with respect to some European and American countries, in the broad sense of the latter term. In this way, Colombia's role in the international development of high quality accreditation in higher education is analysed.

Therefore, far from Gruzinski's (2001) criticism of the Eurocentric nature of historical comparisons, this article takes Europe and countries in the Americas as its basis in order to determine Colombia's particular process in university quality accreditation, rather than to propose as examples or models the ways of proceeding in this regard in other latitudes. Thus, the main object of contrast is the Colombian CNA; the contrast is useful, then, to identify the specificities of the Colombian model in comparison with other agencies and processes in the West.

For reasons of delimitation, the United States is considered first for the category on the origins of quality accreditation in higher education. Then, the first accreditation processes in Latin America are considered in contrast to the underlying value systems in Colombia in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Next, the characteristics of the accreditation models of the following countries, selected on the basis of the views of Fernández (2015), Días (2006) and García-Arauz (2017), will be taken as a basis: Mexico, with the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (COPAES) and the Inter-institutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CIEES); Argentina, with the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU); Chile, with the National Accreditation Commission (CNA); Peru, with the National System of Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification of Educational Quality (SINEACE); and Brazil, with the National System for the Evaluation of Higher Education (SINAES).

In general, the following European countries are considered for the comparative process of accreditation models, according to the emphasis placed on them by Michavila and Zamorano (2006): Spain, with the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA); the United Kingdom, with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA); Norway, with the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT); and the Netherlands and

Flanders, with the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO).

## Results and Discussion

The International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (2020), based in turn on Woodhouse (2013), outlines three moments of development in terms of quality assurance in higher education institutions. The first is located in the United States, at the beginning of the 20th century, through independent government agencies. The second is located in the 1960s, in the United Kingdom and Ireland, and although the document reviewed does not account for the rise of postgraduate accreditation in Brazil, this country could also be considered for the same decade (Días, 2006; Barreyro, 2020). The third occurs to a large extent in the 1990s. In the last two periods, the agencies are mostly dependent on the government of each country.

In the following, three categories are proposed which emerge from the methodology outlined above and which relate, respectively, to the three waves of quality development mentioned above. First of all, the conditions of the origin of educational accreditation in the United States in the early 20th century are discussed in contrast to the underlying value systems in Colombia regarding the quality of higher education until the late 1950s; The next step is to compare the initial characteristics of the conception of quality around higher education institutions in Colombia with those of accreditation in Latin America from the 1960s to the 1980s; finally, the current characteristics of high quality accreditation of higher education in Colombia, Latin America and Europe, since the last decade of the 20th century, are described. The priority in this third category, during the progress of this article, is understood in view of the most outstanding advance of accreditation processes, "when an explosion of agencies developed worldwide"(Instituto Internacional para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe, 2020).

Birth of accreditation in the United States and underlying values of quality in Colombia in the early 20th Century

The number of higher education institutions multiplied in the United States throughout the 19th century. In 1819, governmental interference in higher education was limited and, in principle, there was a need for a homogeneous articulation between secondary and tertiary education and, on the other hand, it became important to define the curriculum of higher education programmes in a general way. To this end, the Middle States Association (MSA) was created to guide institutions on the appropriate courses for careers, as well as to standardise qualifications for university entrance and to establish a link between the school, the university and the government. These purposes are achieved through two associated bodies, The College Board and The Carnegie Unit, which are responsible, respectively, for standardising the credit system in higher education institutions and for guiding the optimal performance of students in college (MSCHE, n.d.). These developments preceded institutional accreditation in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century.

Although, according to Brock (2006), the processes of quality regulation in higher education institutions are inherited from the religious or political control activities developed in Eastern or European universities throughout history, the evaluation for accreditation purposes that originated in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century (Young, 1983) is configured, from its beginnings, as the supervision of institutional integrity (Balán, 2009), beyond religious or political purposes, characteristic of the controls established in previous centuries. The purpose of this accreditation process in the United States is to regulate entry to higher education, especially for immigrants, and with the aim of promoting the achievement of permanent excellence (Pabón, 1995).

In 1918, the American Council on Education (ACE) was formed to study the standardisation and effectiveness of accreditation processes. Between 1919 and 1921, the MSA creates the Commission on Higher Education (CHE) and the Commission on Secondary Schools (CSS), in order to propose guidelines for the accreditation of the quality of higher education; among the criteria considered in the first processes are teachers, infrastructure, libraries and social work. For the first time, external peer reviewers were appointed to visit and assess the quality of higher education institutions and academic programmes. Following these scenarios, quality accreditation in higher education in the United States became widely recognised around 1930 (Guzmán, 2017).

The post-war period brings with it concerns about the quality of new universities seeking to benefit from state resources, in view of the financial support for war veterans to train academically (Kelchen, 2017). This proliferation of higher education institutions calls for regulations and hence the creation of new agencies, namely the National Accrediting Commission, the National Committee of Accrediting Agencies and the Federation of Regional Higher Education Accrediting Commissions.

Although accreditation in Colombia emerged at the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century, underlying values of quality in higher education can be recognised during the first decades. In other words, it is not possible to speak of the birth of accreditation in Colombia at that time, as in the United States; however, there are political and social axiologies that shape a sense of quality that to a certain extent coincide, but are predominantly distant. Therefore, although quality obeys recent discursive practices in Colombian higher education (Casassus, 2000; Páez, 2015), the concept is recognised, in the university sphere, within the movements and public policies of the 20th century, if we take into account the factors currently evaluated by the CNA and the concept of quality proposed by the CESU (2020).

In the second decade of the 20th century, influenced by European education and Latin American student movements, students and intellectuals proposed reforms for higher education. The interests of quality were oriented towards national identity, work, industry and a convergence between the physical, morality and intellectuality (Piñeres, 2001). Following Law 62 of 1916, the National Pedagogical Congress was set up to discuss educational issues at all levels. This academic meeting gave rise to proposals such as the emphasis on interdisciplinary university education and the investment of foreign teachers (Dussan et al., 2013). Such approaches entail an idea of quality that, although not explicitly defined in the law in question, can be inferred from the aims projected by the intellectuals and students of the time..

According to Herrera (2002), in the third decade of the 20th century, the aims of the educational reforms in higher education crystallised. Law 68 of 1935, in the government of López Pumarejo, determines the investment in the purchase of land for the construction of buildings for the new university city in Bogotá. This infrastructural emphasis entails a sense of quality that distances itself from the improvement of the pedagogical practices of the time, focused on memoristic processes and colonial university careers (Acevedo, 2015), as well as on the preparation courses for secondary school and the final exam, aspects negatively valued by the student body (Acevedo & Correa, 2018).

In the 1950s, the National University Fund (FUN), created by Decree 3686 of 1954, focused its investment on three factors: university teaching, the hiring of professionals to improve teaching and courses for postgraduates. The focus, rather than infrastructural, is on the processes of pedagogical mediation and the continuing education of university graduates. The concept of quality, once again, depends on the underlying values of the actors involved in public education policy.

From the above contrast, it can be concluded that, while accreditation is born as a national process in the United States and is configured as a guarantor of the educational quality of higher education institutions, in Colombia this attribute is inferred from the actions of student movements and the stipulations of public policy. As the standardisation of the credit system and the guidelines for institutional accreditation are sought in the United States, academic meetings are held in Colombia to discuss educational issues, in which priority is given to interdisciplinary education and the investment of foreign teachers. In the same vein, while accreditation commissions were set up in the United States to establish evaluation criteria centred on teaching, infrastructure, libraries and social work, in Colombia student movements were moving towards university reforms that prioritised industry, national identity, work and the convergence of intellectual, physical and moral aspects.

During the post-war period, the United States guarantees higher education for military veterans by directing resources to properly accredited institutions. This leads to the construction of new universities seeking to benefit from the resources; these institutions require careful evaluation by new accrediting bodies. In Colombia, after the emphasis on land purchases during López Pumarejo's presidential term and the priority given to end-of-degree exams that were negatively evaluated by the student body, FUN focuses attention on important factors in the pedagogical sphere, focusing on the improvement of university professorships.

So far, accreditation has been born and developed in the United States, while in Colombia, there is a dynamism of quality factors, which depend on the moment and the ideological perspective of the entity or organism that proposes them. Accreditation as a process spread to Europe and Latin America after the 1960s.

### ***3.1. Initial characteristics of quality assessment in higher education in Latin America and underlying values of quality in Colombia up to the 1980s***

In Latin America, high quality accreditation in higher education began in the 1960s. Brazil initiated such processes exclusively in postgraduate programmes, through the creation of the Commission (or Coordination) for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). Since then, the concept of evaluation has overlapped with that of accreditation in Brazil, to the extent that the latter term is not common in Brazilian literature or public documents (Barreyro, 2020).

In the 1980s in Latin America, there were limitations on the investment of public resources in higher education, in view of the economic crises that occurred at the time. Paradoxically, the number of students enrolled increased, which had negative results on the quality of higher education institutions (Herrera & Aguilar, 2009). Globalisation also gives rise to the opening of private universities and, with it, the need to reflect on quality criteria that ensure the effective provision of educational services by higher education institutions (Herrera & Aguilar, 2009; García-Arauz, 2017). Together with globalisation and the limitations on investment in higher education, the following factors contributed, in the 1980s, to the creation of accreditation systems years later (or, in the case of Mexico, from the end of the same decade):

(...) organisational differentiation, diversification of functions, changes in the world of work, the growth of educational service offerings from abroad, the increase in virtual and distance modes and the emergence of new types of providers (Días, 2006).

Within this general framework of higher education evaluation, from the 1960s to the 1980s, Colombia was confronted with a variety of approaches

to university quality, even though this concept is not very common. Among others, the proposals of Rudolph P. Atcon, José Félix Patiño, the Colombian Association of Universities (ASCUN) and FUN, the student movement, the Congress of the Republic and the Ministry of Education. Such approaches bring with them a sense of quality that depends on the ideologies of the proposing body or organisation. In these three decades, quality, although not directly related to the current meaning of accreditation, and despite being a little-used concept, is inferred in terms of the ideals of different actors in the field of higher education.

Atcon's discourse (1963), from a North American perspective, gives priority to university autonomy, the administration of educational centres and the improvement of the quality of teaching through research; aspects which, over the years, have been incorporated into university public policy and even into quality accreditation processes. The emphasis on such aspects goes beyond the conceptions of infrastructure as the basis of quality and, in particular, positively values the improvement of teaching in favour of quality. Atcon's (1963) relations between teaching and research are understood within the conceptual framework of quality at the time:

At this stage it is not a question of starting a discussion for or against the separation of teaching and scientific research. Personally, I am convinced that the two activities complement each other and that they can always be fruitful for each other. (p. 20)

Patiño (1966) takes up, as a fundamental proposal, the priority of research. The then Rector of the National University, based on the proposals of Atcon (1963), questioned the size of the campus, the number of students and infrastructure as factors of quality. For Patiño (1966), the following criteria are determinants of quality in higher education: the adequate use of resources, student performance, exercise and the well-being of graduates. The most striking coincidence between the rector's statements

and the discourse of Atcon (1963), which reflects the underlying values of the 1960s, is the socio-educational and not the infrastructural function of quality higher education.

The concerns in this decade about quality in Colombian universities are understandable in view of the problem outlined by the Basic Plan for Higher Education, proposed by ASCUN and FUN (1969). The study shows the instability in the number of students enrolled in public and private universities and the tendency to drop out, which financially unbalances university resources. For Alzate (2016), the proliferation of higher education institutions, at this time, produces low quality and, in addition, the high cost of higher education is determined by factors such as "the lack of a serious cost projection study, the excessive cost of university administration, the unpredictability in the flow of funds for a particular institution" (p. 49). This panorama led to the proposal of the so-called Minimum Programme by the student movement in the 1970s, in which the abolition of university councils, the freezing of tuition fees and the control of private universities were proposed. ASCUN, for its part, proposed a statute for higher education, which would establish basic criteria for the functioning of higher education institutions and consider FUN and ASCUN as regulators of the public university economy. In the same context, the Congress of the Republic, by means of bills, seeks to improve the welfare, financing and autonomy of universities. These initiatives, although they have not been fully realised, are indicative of factors that go beyond infrastructure and research in the process of improving the service of higher education in the country.

Decree 80 of 1980 organises the higher education system. Although for Rodríguez (2018) the document proposes a mercantilist vision of education, it is the most complete, up to that time, in terms of quality orientation. Throughout the 194 articles, distributed in seven titles, the following meanings of quality in higher education are recognised, among others:

coverage, scientific and pedagogical training of teachers, physical resources, social contribution and financing. All of these have become, over time, explicit or implicit quality factors, evaluated by the CNA in Colombia after the 1990s.

### ***3.2. Accreditation in Colombia, Latin America and Europe: a brief contrast among agencies***

With few exceptions, the boom in higher education accreditation occurred in both Europe and Latin America during the 1990s. After quality accreditation was stipulated within the public education policy of each country, the need arose to create governmental and non-governmental agencies in order to consolidate models, criteria and processes for the transparent and optimal development of evaluation in higher education institutions and their academic programmes.

The purpose of the following paragraphs is none other than to contrast the characteristics of the NAC with the features of outstanding agencies in Europe and Latin America. To this end, two global categories are identified: particularities of the accrediting agencies and factors stipulated for evaluation. In this way, the development of such a process in Colombia is understood with respect to international accreditation activities, as has been done in previous subtitles. Although it is general, achieving this comparison leads to an understanding of the similarities and differences of the Colombian model within an international context.

Colombia, since Law 30 of 1992, has had the CNA, whose functions are established by Agreement 06 of the National Council of Higher Education (CESU) in 1995: selection of academic peers, stipulation of homogeneous quality features, definition of accreditation criteria, proof of the quality of programmes or institutions, recognition of aspects to be improved and suggestion of accreditation to the Ministry of National Education. Since then, the CNA, as the exclusive agency in



Colombia, has evaluated the quality of higher education programmes and institutions, based on factors and guidelines that have changed over the years, in favour of the continuous improvement of the process.

The NAC's assessment factors have been refined over the course of history. In 1997, through Procedural Guide 3, the NAC proposes objects for evaluation, such as: "prospectuses, curricula, syllabuses, guides, bibliography, teaching aids, typical evaluations, assignments, essays, laboratory reports, samples of the intellectual production of professors, degree works and others that are considered relevant" (p. 17), as well as: "budgets, statutes, regulations, organisation chart, development plans and others that are considered relevant" (p. 17). Aspects such as the infrastructural function are also reviewed: welfare facilities, classrooms, offices, laboratories, administrative offices, etc.

The first CNA guidelines for institutional accreditation were published in 2001. For the first time, they recognised ten quality guidelines: suitability, relevance, responsibility, integrity, equity, coherence, universality, transparency, effectiveness and efficiency; they also proposed ten factors with their respective characteristics: institutional mission and project, professors and students, academic processes, research, relevance and social impact, self-evaluation and regulation processes, institutional welfare, organisation, management and administration, physical plant and academic support resources, and, finally, financial resources.

In 2006, the first guidelines for programme accreditation were published, in which the ten quality guidelines of the previous guidelines were maintained and the following eight factors were evaluated: "institutional mission and project, students, professors, academic processes, institutional welfare, organisation, administration and management, graduates and impact on the environment, and physical and financial resources" (CNA, 2006, p. 49).

Three years later, the first guidelines for the accreditation of postgraduate programmes were published, in which an additional quality guideline to those already known in previous guidelines was proposed: sustainability. On the other hand, ten factors are proposed for evaluation: "Consistency between objectives and mission, students, professors, academic processes, research, articulation with the environment, internationalisation, strategic alliances and insertion in global scientific networks, wellbeing and institutional environment, graduates and impact analysis, physical resources and administrative and financial management" (CNA, 2009, p. 16).

In CESU Agreement 03 of 2014, slight changes are made to the quality guidelines and assessment factors, taking into account the reorientation of institutional accreditation goals, which now focus on the diversity of institutions and on valuing the mission and characteristics of higher education institutions. The proposed quality principles are universality, integrity, comprehensiveness, equity, suitability, accountability, coherence, transparency, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, visibility and sustainable development. The CESU, in turn, adds a factor to the ten already known: national and international visibility, and divides a previous factor into two: students and professors. This agreement is partially modified by Agreement 03 of 2017, which distinguishes between accreditation by place of development and multi-campus. This means that, as of today, higher education institutions can apply for the accreditation process for a single site or for one of the sites that make up the institution.

Agreement 01 of 2018 establishes the following conditions for institutional accreditation: students, professors, graduates, research, welfare, institutional governance, planning and quality improvement, administrative management, infrastructure and financial resources; it also proposes five conditions for programme accreditation: professors, curricular management, educational resources, extension, and national and international interaction. Each condition

is made up of a certain number of characteristics, which in turn contain aspects to be evaluated.

Decree 1280 (2018) focuses largely on qualified registration, understood as the recognition granted by the National Intersectoral Commission for Quality in Higher Education (CONACES) to institutions and programmes that meet the minimum quality requirements for their operation. This decree also stipulates the conditions for the renewal of institutional accreditation and emphasises the denial of the renewal of the qualified registration in case the programme does not apply for accreditation renewal within the stipulated deadlines. The provisions of this document are repealed by Decree 1330 of 2019, which establishes the following minimum quality conditions for the evaluation of higher education institutions: selection and evaluation processes for students and professors, administrative and academic organisation, self-evaluation, graduates, welfare model, sufficient resources to achieve the objectives, evaluation of institutional conditions and their respective renewal; likewise, minimum quality conditions are proposed for programmes: programme name, justification, curriculum, organisation of academic activities, research, innovation or artistic creation, relationship with the external sector, teachers, educational means, infrastructure, evaluation of programme conditions and their respective renewal of the qualified registration .

Agreement 02 of 2020 unifies the accreditation process for higher education programmes and institutions. To this end, it proposes seventeen principles of quality in all cases: suitability, universality, coherence, relevance, integrity, objectivity, transparency, accessibility, diversity, inclusion, equity, adaptability, innovation, synergy, effectiveness, accountability and sustainability.

Both the process of institutional and programme accreditation is developed on the basis of quality factors, made up of characteristics with aspects to be evaluated. In the case of academic programmes, there are twelve factors, containing a total of

48 characteristics with their respective specific aspects. The factors are Educational project of the programme and institutional identity, Students, Teachers, Graduates, Academic aspects and learning outcomes, Permanence and graduation, Interaction with the national and international environment, Contributions of research, innovation, technological development and creation associated with the academic programme, Welfare of the academic community of the programme, Educational means and learning environments, Organisation, administration and financing of the academic programme, Physical and technological resources (p. 20-21).

Likewise, higher education institutions have the same number of factors, consisting of thirty-eight characteristics, which in turn have aspects to be assessed. These factors are: Institutional identity, Institutional governance and transparency, Institutional development, management and sustainability, Continuous improvement and self-regulation, Academic structure and processes, Contributions of research, innovation, technological development and creation, Social impact, National and international visibility, Institutional wellbeing, Faculty community, Student community and Alumni community (p. 34).

A new process, considered in these latest documents, refers to the so-called learning outcomes, which are understood as "the express statements of what a student is expected to know and demonstrate at the time of completing their academic programme" (Decree 1330, p. 4) and "constitute the axis of an improvement process in which the degree to which the student comes close to obtaining the outcomes defined by the academic programme is evaluated" (Agreement 02 of 2020, p. 7). This concept has generated multiple dialogues on its relevance (Martínez, 2021; El Observatorio de la Universidad Colombiana, 2021); a discussion and debate that should be addressed from what is proposed and regulated by the country in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of 2021 and to the country's public policy that has embraced the

essential guidelines presented by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an international organisation whose mission is to propose and embrace public policy guidelines to improve society in general, and to which Colombia has been linked since 2018.

Finally, the purpose of the CNA, in Agreement 02, is based on institutional diversity and the specific characteristics of each evaluated context: "(...) it aims to improve the quality of higher education, in harmony with social, cultural, scientific, technological and innovation dynamics" (CESU, 2020, p. 6) and "(...) proximity between the optimum corresponding to the character of the academic programme or to the legal nature, identity, mission and typology of the institution (...)" (CESU, 2020, p. 6).

The main agencies in Latin American countries, like the CNA, have evolved over time, which is an indication of the internal processes of self-assessment of each evaluation body, in favour of improvement; nevertheless, they have maintained the purpose of the accreditation process. For example, Chile and Peru: in the 1990s, the National Commission for Undergraduate Accreditation (CNAP) and the National Commission for Postgraduate Accreditation (CONAP) were created, whose functions were assigned in 2006 to the current National Accreditation Commission (CNA). In 2018, through Law 21091, modifications were made, but the essence of the agency was maintained: "To promote, evaluate and accredit the quality of Chile's Higher Education Institutions, as well as their degree courses and programmes" (CNA, 2021). In 2006, the National System of Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification of Educational Quality (SINEACE) was created in Peru through Law 28740. In 2007, through Decree 018-2007-ED, the three quality assurance operators were regulated: the Peruvian Institute for the Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification of Quality in Basic Education (IPEBA), the Council for the Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification of Quality in Non-University Higher Education (CONEACES) and

the Council for the Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification of Quality in University Education (CONEAU). In 2014, through Law 30220, the National Superintendence of University Education (SUNEDU) was created as a parallel body to license the operation of programmes and universities. The essence of the accreditation of the SINEACE model is maintained in the four dimensions that it evaluates: strategic management, comprehensive training, institutional support and results.

These dimensions of institutional evaluation encompass factors, standards and criteria in a similar way to the way in which aspects are immersed in the conditions or factors in Colombia, depending on the moment in the CNA's line of development. CONEAU (1998), for its part, has since 1998 evaluated processes such as teaching, research, development and creation, extension, technology production and transfer, management and governance, human resources, infrastructure, library services and the integration of the university institution. In Brazil, the criteria are divided into three broad categories: Institutional organisation, Social body and Physical facilities (Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Superior, 2010). In Chile, the criteria are derived from five functions, in turn divided into institutional: teaching and learning outcomes, research, creation and/or innovation, links with the environment; and cross-cutting: strategic management and institutional resources, as well as internal quality assurance (CNA, 2021).

In the agencies of European countries, changes in accreditation processes have also been evident, but the interest in quality assurance in higher education and relations between transnational institutions has always been maintained. In the following, only the most representative agencies in Europe with regard to accreditation processes, according to Michavila and Zamorano (2006), are considered. In this case, Spain and the Netherlands are the first examples, followed by the United Kingdom and Norway.

In Spain, the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA), since its creation in 2002, has been responsible for coordinating public policies on quality in higher education. As in Colombia, throughout the 21st century, ANECA has faced some changes, among which stands out the one referred to by Law 15 of 2014, by which it is stipulated as an autonomous body. Since then, ANECA (2021) has defined specific aspects of evaluation, among which are the university, the recognition of degrees obtained abroad, the teaching and research activities of the university community, and the merits of teaching staff and candidates for teaching posts.

In the Netherlands, the Netherlands Accreditation Organisation (NAO) has been established since 2002 to evaluate the quality of higher education. It is precisely this type of process that has led to the country being recognised as one of the models of high quality in university education in the world. The agency evaluates the quantity and quality of the staff, the programme, the results, the services, the objectives of the institution and the quality control. In 2005, also under the dynamics of change, the agency became the Netherlands-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO), whose aim is to foster improvement, promote and assure the quality of higher education in Flanders and the Netherlands (Organización de Acreditación Holandesa-Flamenca, 2021).

On the other hand, the CNA in Colombia has the exclusive function of accrediting higher education programmes and institutions. It thus distances itself from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, n.d.), created in 1997 in the United Kingdom. Among other areas of work, this agency provides consultancy for quality approaches within and outside the UK, monitors quality standards in universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, disseminates education outcomes in the UK, and advises governments on applications for recognition of university programmes or institutions.

Other functions beyond accreditation are also evident in the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). Among other services are the recognition of tertiary vocational education outside Norway, recognition of qualifications of school and kindergarten teachers, accessibility of information related to accreditation processes and recognition of certificates of foreign craftsmen and labourers.

## Conclusions

The origin of accreditation in the United States and Colombia obeys different processes. While in the United States it was born at the beginning of the 20th century as a national process aimed at regulating the entry of immigrants and guaranteeing the quality of higher education institutions, in Colombia it emerged at the end of the same century for purely evaluation and accreditation purposes. If we place Colombia in the historical moment of the origin and initial development of accreditation, we find underlying values that, in the same way, are distant from the accreditation practices of the North American country. The ideologies of the political and student movements shape the quality processes which, for the first half of the 20th century, are considered a priority for higher education in Colombia.

Unlike Brazil and Mexico, Colombia began its accreditation policy in the 1990s. Since the 1960s, Brazil has stood out for its evaluation of postgraduate programmes, with aims and processes similar to accreditation. Mexico, for its part, began the evaluation of higher education institutions in the 1980s.

Among the aspects evaluated by the Latin American and European agencies, there are differences with respect to the factors evaluated by the CNA in Colombia. CONEAU, for example, explicitly evaluates the production of technology; ANECA assesses the merits of the university towards its teaching staff and the recognition of degrees obtained outside Spain. The CNA does not, so far, consider such factors.

Unlike other agencies, the CNA in Colombia is only in charge of accreditation processes or activities directly related to accreditation. Based on the Norwegian or UK system of university quality assessment, it is recognised as having functions that go beyond the limits of higher education accreditation.

Finally, Colombia has considered, through Agreement 02 of 2020, assessing high quality in terms of institutional and programme capacities - according to guidelines already considered in the evaluation of high quality in previous years -, achievements and impacts. Consideration has also been given to recognising institutional identity, coherent and relevant university governance policies and learning outcomes. In addition, the four years of accreditation have been abolished in favour of six, eight and ten years. It is worth noting that these aspects are not explicitly stated in Colombia's previous accreditation models.

Indeed, Colombia shares remarkable similarities with accreditation processes in Latin America and Europe. One of these is the evolution of the accreditation system. In all countries, university quality accreditation procedures vary over time, depending on the global and particular needs of each country. Over the years, the common order in the procedure is also identified: self-evaluation, external evaluation and public opinion of institutional or programme accreditation.

On the other hand, in Latin America, there are historical and political events that create the need to guarantee the quality of higher education: political crises, the offer of private universities, lack of regulation of the university system, etc. For these reasons, many Latin American countries, including Colombia, shaped their public policies in this respect in the 1990s.

In both Latin America and Europe, evaluation factors similar to those that have historically and

currently characterised the NAC in Colombia are recognised. These include, among others, faculty, research, governance, resources and infrastructure.

The accreditation system in Colombia is, for all of the above reasons, pertinently situated in the globalisation of the processes underlying the evaluation of quality in higher education. Although it differs from the initial characteristics of the United States, there are more convergences of basis, essence and procedure that place Colombia within a global accreditation system. Nevertheless, national particularities are recognised in the CNA, in terms of understanding the specific social and cultural characteristics of the universities evaluated for accreditation purposes (CESU, 2020). This provides a balance, typical of the identity of the NAC, with respect to other countries.

### Thank You

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