The National Accreditation System in Colombia: experiences from the National Council of Accreditation (CNA)
New trends in higher education

The National Accreditation System in Colombia: experiences from the National Council of Accreditation (CNA)

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASCOFAME  Colombian Association of Medical Education Faculties
AICOFI  Colombian Association of Engineering Education Faculties
AICOFAEN  Colombian Association of Nursing Education Faculties
ASCOLFA  Colombian Association of Faculties of Administration
CCES  Consultative Commission of Higher Education
CESU  National Council of Higher Education
CNA  National Council of Accreditation
CNDM  National Commission for Master's and Doctorate Programmes
COLCIENCIAS  Institute for the Development of Scientific and Technological Research
HEI  Higher Education Institution
ICFES  Colombian Institute for the Development of Higher Education
DNP  National Department of Planning
ECES  Examination of the Quality of Higher Education
MEN  Ministry of Education
SNIES  National Information System of Higher Education
ABSTRACT

Higher education in Columbia is complex and heterogeneous. It consists of a multi-layer system of universities, colleges, technological institutions as well as intermediate technical/professional institutions. Social demand for higher education from an increasing number of secondary school leavers has grown tremendously over the past two decades. However, due to funding constraints, public provision could only satisfy part of this demand, which has led to the proliferation of numerous private programmes and institutions that offer higher education with different levels of both quality and relevance.

As part of a reform of the higher education system in Colombia proposed in 1992 (Law 30) the system of accreditation of Colombian higher education institutions was created under the auspices of the National Council of Accreditation (CNA), which had been specifically set up by this Law. CNA functions under the National Council of Higher Education (CESU), which is the main body for policy-making in Colombian higher education. CNA consists of a group of highly respected Colombian academics and of a secretariat that is in charge of co-ordinating on-going accreditation processes.

CNA performs two functions in the area of quality assurance: submission of reports on the orientation and co-ordination of voluntary accreditation of quality control of both undergraduate programmes and higher education institutions, as well as reports on the evaluation of both “previous accreditation” of teaching training programmes, and of engineering and health programmes, known as the “verification of minimum quality standards”.

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This case study refers to voluntary accreditation for high levels of quality. “Accreditation of Excellence” is both a voluntary and temporary process and its methodology stresses quality enhancement rather than quality control. As a consequence, “Accreditation of Excellence” adopted a system whereby ideal characteristics of quality are compared in the light of reality, thus creating strong incentives for quality improvement.

More recently, it was also decided to develop a methodology for the accreditation of institutions which focuses on processes of the entire higher education institution and is less geared towards specific study programmes. Both processes are perceived to be complementary and based one on the other.

The methodology for the Accreditation of Excellence of academic programmes and institutions is founded on a four-stage process. Once an institution has requested accreditation of its programmes, the first phase concerned with checking the eligibility of criteria may begin. Following this stage, the academic undergraduate programme of the institution undergoing accreditation conducts a self-evaluation based on a pre-established methodology and set of criteria and quality characteristics. An external peer visit of the institution then follows, which leads to the preparation of a report on which the institutional management may comment. The concluding report of the peers is submitted to CNA which then proceeds to the final evaluation or synthesis and issues a recommendation to the Ministry of Education to accredit the programme for a given duration ranging from three to ten years.

CNA has prepared a model for the Accreditation of Excellence, which is based on the following seven factors (see Appendix 2):

- Institutional project;
- Students and teachers;
Abstract

- Academic processes;
- Institutional well-being;
- Organization, administration and management;
- Graduate students and impact on the environment;
- Physical and financial resources.

The factors are described and organized into a total number of 66 characteristics. Each characteristic includes indicators that allow measuring the degree of compliance with an ideal value. According to the object for accreditation, certain characteristics are more important than others and some are considered as crucial. This leaves institutions and peers with a checklist of items to be interpreted with regard to a particular department or specific institutional circumstances. Institutional accreditation assessment is based on similar factors and characteristics but the focus is more on the institutional and organizational processes.

As of August 2002, 138 programmes had been proposed by CNA for accreditation, 36 of which were not accredited. At the same time, a great number of other programmes were engaged at different stages in the accreditation process, which brought the total number up to approximately 400.

A certain number of incentives have been created by the State for accredited programmes, such as an institutional “Award for the Concern with Quality” in public sector management, or tax exemption for donors of funds to institutions with accredited programmes.

Accreditation in Colombia is perceived as a success story. It has helped instil a culture of evaluation, which enhances concerns with quality and management processes in general. It is also, however, still struggling with many organizational problems such as aiming a higher scale, implementing the necessary infrastructure to do so, or coordinating with other mechanisms of quality assurance.
INTRODUCTION

The Colombian National Accreditation System was set up to both convince society that higher education institutions and academic programmes strive for the highest possible quality standards and that they attain their aims and objectives. In Colombia, the Accreditation of Excellence is a voluntary process and temporary in nature (accreditation is granted for periods ranging from three to ten years at a time). The system is set up in such a way that it preserves university autonomy as set forth in the National Constitution. This process, comprising self-, external and final evaluation, leads to the State’s acknowledgement of high quality.

The National Council of Accreditation (CNA) is entrusted with the responsibility of leading the process, designing and disseminating the accreditation model and of performing the final evaluation, on the basis of which a recommendation is made to the Ministry of Education to issue accreditation, as the case may be. Regulations stipulate that Council members should comprise seven well-known academics that are appointed for a five-year period on the basis of their academic reputation. Council members do not, therefore, represent any particular institution, guild or association whatsoever. Policies to be implemented by CNA are drawn up by the National Council of Higher Education (CESU) – the highest ruling body of higher education in Colombia.

2. Article 9, Agreement 04 of 1995, issued by the National Council of Higher Education (CESU), dictates that once two and a half years of the first period have elapsed, 50 per cent of Council members should be replaced.
CNA enjoys full autonomy as far as deciding and planning activities are concerned – CNA policy initiatives have been approved thus far by CESU. Accreditation was initially implemented for academic programmes: universities, colleges, technological schools and technical/professional institutions. Furthermore, CNA has just set up a new procedure for institutional accreditation, as opposed to programme accreditation so far implemented. The new procedure does not show meaningful dissimilarities with the accreditation of academic programmes; both have at their core an ideal notion of higher education. In order to account for the quality of study programmes, academic peers, who must examine their compliance with quality requirements that are set forth by academic communities in similar professions or disciplines, evaluate them. Peers must also examine their congruency with objectives pursued by the institution concerned.

As far as the more recent mechanism for institutional accreditation is concerned, quality should be evaluated by means of compliance to both the aims and objectives of higher education. Furthermore, the ability of the institution to self-evaluate and regulate itself, the achievement and social relevance of the institution’s mission

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3. Law 30 of 1992 prescribes that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should go into greater depths as regards the comprehensive education of Colombian people. They should train people in such a way as to enable them to fulfil the professional, research and social roles the country requires of them. HEIs should work towards the creation, development and dissemination of knowledge in all its arrangements and representations, and ensure that knowledge is used in all fields, so as to meet the country’s needs; provide the community with a qualified service, in view of becoming a means of scientific, cultural, economic, political and ethical development at both national and regional levels. Also, HEIs should be aligned with each other in their work, as well as with all other educational structures; they should encourage national unity, decentralization, regional integration and institutional co-operation, so that the country’s different regions can avail themselves of the possibility to access human resources and appropriate technologies, allowing them to adequately meet their requirements. Besides, HEIs should promote the setting up and strengthening of national academic communities, and their co-ordination with their international peers. Also, the protection of a healthy environment and the safeguarding and promotion of the country’s cultural heritage have become declared goals.
statement and institutional project are analyzed through this mechanism. Accreditation looks into ways in which both the core tasks of education and research and the social implications are complied with; it examines the social impact of academic work, as well as the development of administration and management, welfare and both physical and financial resources.

The special features stemming from the institutional mission and project are taken into consideration by both types of accreditation (i.e., accreditation of study programmes and institutions). The mission is perceived as an expression of the institution’s identity and history of what it actually is and of what it should be. The institutional project establishes objectives, action strategies and resources needed for institutional development and compliance with the mission. The appropriation made by the institutional community of the institution’s mission and projects, and its commitment to the latter, ensure a linkage between interactions and goals. The evaluation of quality-determining factors is of utmost importance in both programme and institutional accreditation.

However, the quality assurance system in Colombia covers other mechanisms which are of a more traditional nature and which are performed by other institutional actors in the system: the licensing of new private institutions, the registration of new academic programmes and the ongoing supervision of both institution and programme functioning at both undergraduate and post-graduate level. Accreditation of Excellence is thus not the only mechanism for quality management, but it was created to be a complementary mechanism to perform a precise role within the system: it concerns specifically the establishment of quality enhancement, whereas the other mechanisms are concerned mainly with quality control.
The National Accreditation System in Colombia: experiences from the National Council of Accreditation (CNA)

This case study covers the structure and functioning of the Colombian National Accreditation system, in relation to the whole quality assurance system, but with particular reference to Accreditation of Excellence of academic programmes. The first section is a broad introduction to the higher education system in general and the institutional affiliation of the mechanism within this system. The process of Accreditation of Excellence is then presented through a detailed description of the methodology: self-study, peer visit, weighting and grading. The aim of the study is to present the introduction, implementation and functions of the accreditation system, together with the problems and lessons learned in the Colombian context.
I. HIGHER EDUCATION IN COLOMBIA

Colombia has a long and rich tradition in higher education. Within recent decades, the system has moved from an elitist to a mass system of higher education with currently 16 per cent of the age group enrolled in a higher education institution. The system is diverse and comprises both a university and an emerging non-university sector. The private sector, which has a different nature, is developing quickly and puts pressure on the whole higher education system. The current regulatory framework in Colombia is a blend of both tight governmental control and an attempt to increase governmental supervision with accountability.

Brief description of the Colombian higher education system

In Colombia, the higher education sector has a legal framework laid down by the Colombian National Constitution of 1991. It has evolved by means of Law 30 – 1992 (or Higher Education Law) and by Law 115 – 1994, known as the General Law of Education, together with supplementary regulations.

Higher education is complex and heterogeneous and is fashioned by four different types of institutions: colleges, technological institutions, technical/professional institutions and universities. All are of different origin, complexity, size, vocation and quality, and are autonomous in accordance with constitutional provisions. Also, they are subject to the constitutional right of the State to control and oversee their work, in order to assure society of the quality of education they offer and of the compliance of their aims.
Both high school students and graduates, who were formerly unable to hope for higher education, have exerted extreme pressure on the Colombian system during the last thirty years. This is significantly illustrated by figures published by the Colombian Institute for Higher Education (ICFES). While in the early eighties, 236,000 young people applied for a place in a higher education institution, by 2000 this figure had more than doubled to 582,000 students (see Table 1). As an outcome of this situation and because of the academic, administrative and financial autonomy granted to higher education institutions, the supply side has considerably expanded. Thus, insufficient available places in State higher education institutions entailed considerable growth in the private sector: in 1997, the total enrolment of students in private institutions reached a high of 67.8 per cent.

**Table 1. Student registrations for state examination required for admission into higher education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11th Grade Students</td>
<td>169,689</td>
<td>189,147</td>
<td>208,129</td>
<td>234,216</td>
<td>253,574</td>
<td>288,571</td>
<td>369,813</td>
<td>405,223</td>
<td>426,422</td>
<td>453,962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former High School Students</td>
<td>666,380</td>
<td>512,154</td>
<td>57,017</td>
<td>66,414</td>
<td>65,220</td>
<td>91,256</td>
<td>110,446</td>
<td>104,971</td>
<td>116,976</td>
<td>128,860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>236,327</td>
<td>240,362</td>
<td>265,146</td>
<td>300,630</td>
<td>318,794</td>
<td>379,827</td>
<td>480,259</td>
<td>510,191</td>
<td>543,398</td>
<td>582,822</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: ICFES, Servicio Nacional de Pruebas.*

Growth in higher education enrolment has been sudden. The student population of 80,000 in 1970 showed a fourfold increase in 1981, while in 2000 it reached 873,322 (see Table 2). However, places have not met the demand; in 1999 only 250,000 young people, a figure equivalent to half of the actual demand, could enroll in the first academic period.
Table 2. Progression of enrolment in higher education institutions 1985 – 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical/Prof.</td>
<td>31,802</td>
<td>31,004</td>
<td>29,310</td>
<td>32,164</td>
<td>34,925</td>
<td>43,102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological</td>
<td>40,156</td>
<td>33,327</td>
<td>41,846</td>
<td>89,647</td>
<td>92,737</td>
<td>113,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>311,682</td>
<td>400,515</td>
<td>459,405</td>
<td>430,717</td>
<td>664,629</td>
<td>717,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>383,640</td>
<td>464,846</td>
<td>530,561</td>
<td>552,528</td>
<td>792,291</td>
<td>873,322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ICFES.

Even though Colombia is a “country of cities” (there are more than 30 cities with a population of more than 300,000 inhabitants each), higher education enrolment is concentrated in four cities only (more than 75 per cent of students): Barranquilla, Bogotá, Cali and Medellín. On the other hand, student enrolment in the various fields of knowledge is rather imbalanced. In 1997, the fields of Administration, Economy, Accountancy and related subject matters of study accounted for 32 per cent of the total enrolment, while the fields of Engineering, Architecture and Urbanism, amounted to 27 per cent and the fields of Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Agronomy, Veterinary Medicine and related areas, hardly reached 2 per cent. Moreover in 1997, 59.8 per cent of the student population was attending day school, 30.1 per cent evening school and 10.1 per cent was enrolled in distance learning.

However, when Colombian rates of participation in higher education are compared with other Latin American countries, they appear to remain low. In 1997, the participation rate in Colombia hardly exceeded 15 per cent, whereas the average rate in Latin America amounted to 18 per cent.
Also, during the last thirty years, the number of institutions and academic programmes showed a significant increase (see Tables 3 and 4).

### Table 3. Number of higher education institutions 1985 – 2002

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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical-Prof.</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleges</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ICFES.

### Table 4. Number of higher education programmes 1981 – 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical Prof.</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>617</td>
<td>732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>1,017</td>
<td>1,004</td>
<td>1,285</td>
<td>1,393</td>
<td>1,912</td>
<td>2,303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotals</td>
<td>1,554</td>
<td>1,556</td>
<td>2,029</td>
<td>2,265</td>
<td>2,948</td>
<td>3,515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>1,554</td>
<td>1,556</td>
<td>2,029</td>
<td>2,265</td>
<td>2,948</td>
<td>3,515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>586</td>
<td>662</td>
<td>837</td>
<td>1,427</td>
<td>1,817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,936</td>
<td>2,142</td>
<td>2,691</td>
<td>3,102</td>
<td>4,375</td>
<td>5,330</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ICFES.

In 1974, ICFES reported 95 HEIs: 69 universities and 26 technological institutions offering 837 academic programmes. In 1981, only seven years later, ICFES records show 200 institutions, comprising 60 universities, 50 colleges, 22 technological institutions and a significant number of institutions providing a new sort of post-
secondary school education, i.e., a total of 68 professional intermediate institutions. These four different types of higher education institutions combined offered 1,593 academic programmes. By 1997 the number of HEIs reached 269 (93 universities, 65 colleges, 59 technological schools and 52 technical/professional schools), and their programmes totalled 4,375, of which 2,948 were graduate and 1,427 postgraduate. During a period of five years following 1997, the number of institutions had increased by another 44 (this includes sections in cities other than where university headquarters were already situated, where a certain autonomy to function had been authorized by the Ministry of Education), which brought the total to 313 HEIs by August 2002. As can be observed in Tables 3 and 4, the increase of institutions and programmes in the last decade was exaggerated, inasmuch as 291 institutions that already existed in 2000 offered 5,330 academic programmes, of which 3,513 were undergraduate and 1,817 postgraduate studies. Such an increase in institutions and programmes was been commensurate between the public and private sectors, neither was it equally distributed between the country’s central area and the rest of the Colombian territory, nor was it fair in terms of quality. As stated above, financial constraints with regard to the supply of public higher education encouraged private sector initiatives – consequently the enrolment in private sector HEIs had an increase as high as 70 per cent in 1997.

Regarding the higher education administrative set up, the National Council of Higher Education (CESU), a governmental body headed by the Ministry of Education, is entrusted with the responsibility of planning and co-ordinating higher education. Membership of the Technical Secretariat in charge of implementing the Ministry’s policies, consists of ICFES, academics, COLCIENCIAS (Colombia’s Institute for the Development of Scientific and Technological Research) and the National Department of Planning (DNP), as well
as representatives from public and private higher education institutions, the industrial sector, teachers and students.

**Quality assurance mechanisms**

Colombian quality assurance is regulated by a number of mechanisms, among which are also included several of a global definition of quality assurance. The quality assurance mechanisms consist of the initial opening of an institution or programme and supervision of the minimum level of both quality and high quality assurance. These different functions form a step-by-step process that begins with the opening of an institution or a programme, proceeds to the assurance of minimum quality and finally aims the high quality level.

Certain quality assurance mechanisms in the context of Colombian higher education apply to institutions or programmes (both undergraduate and graduate), whereas others concern the academic results of students having completed undergraduate studies, by means of an Examination of the Quality of Higher Education (ECES).

All of these mechanisms are put in place in view of quality achievement of specific aspects of higher education. The mechanisms in view of minimum quality assurance accreditation – that only aims at the ‘high quality’ level – are generally classified into two groups: mandatory and voluntary.

**Opening: the initial assessment**

The Ministry of Education, upon the recommendation of the Consultative Commission of Higher Education *(Comisión Consultativa de Educación Superior)*, (CCES), must approve the opening of a new higher education institution, or of a branch in an existing institution.
and/or the transformation of technical and technological institutions into university institutes. The CCES, created in 1999 by Government Decree (Decreto 1178), is an advisory council to the Ministry of Education (MEN). This organization is responsible for such activities as, for instance, the evaluation of projects to create new HEIs or proposals to transform existing institutes (e.g. the Technical and Practical Institute becomes the Technical Institute, the Technical Institute is changed to the University Institute, or University Institute to University). This commission, made up of five members from academia that are designated by the MEN, receive full technical and administrative support from ICFES.

Prior to establishing a new undergraduate programme, the institution must submit to an evaluation of minimum quality standards before it may function, and once the minimum standards are met, the MEN orders ICFES to grant a “registry of quality”. CNA is responsible for the evaluation of programmes in the areas of Health, Education and Engineering and ICFES of the remaining areas of study.

In order to put in place a Master's or Doctorate Programme, the university must submit to a proposal of evaluation carried out by the CNDM, the National Commission for Master’s and Doctorate Programmes (Comisión Nacional de Doctorados y Maestrías), under ICFES. By 1994, the Government Decree (Decreto 2791) also initiated this commission, composed of five members of renowned academic merit appointed by the CESU.

The National Council of Accreditation is charged with the evaluation of minimum quality standards of undergraduate programmes in areas of Science, Health, Engineering and Educational Science (“previous accreditation”) and with recommending to the MEN academic programmes that merit the registry of quality. The functions of the CNA are regulatory, and even though slightly
disorganized, have contributed effectively to the guarantee of quality of higher education. In the following schema, the different functions are represented in the general quality management context.

**Figure 1. The Colombian quality assurance mechanism**
Supervision

Besides the alleged “voluntary” Accreditation of Excellence, the General Law of Education, Laws 115 – 1994 and 272 – 1998, set forth in Colombia a mandatory “previous accreditation”, certifying the compliance of minimal quality requirements for programmes of wide social impact, such as in education (previous accreditation for teacher training programmes). Equally, Laws 792 and 917 – 2001 established minimum standards of quality for Health programmes, such as Medicine, Dentistry, Nursing, Physiotherapy, Bacteriology, Nutrition and Dietetics, amongst others, and for Engineering. The CNA, as mentioned above, will also be in charge of this mandatory accreditation. The study of minimum standards is under way towards the creation and operation of programmes in other fields of study and disciplines.

“Previous accreditation”, ruled by Decree 272 – 1998, is altogether different from voluntary Accreditation of Excellence. It is an instrument by which the State fulfils its mission to oversee and survey teacher training, as laid down in the Constitution. To receive “previous accreditation” status in education, programmes are evaluated on the basis of 26 different input criteria. The “previous (or previa) accreditation” is granted for seven years.

Information required for previous accreditation on programmes in Engineering and Health are based on 16 requirements in the domains of selection and evaluation systems, laboratory equipment, library, credit system and on other basic curricular aspects). When Health and Engineering programmes are already in place, the institutions have two years to prove that they have met the minimum standards, before the programmes are closed down. New programmes in these areas must possess all 16 basic standards of quality mentioned
above. These minimum standards closely resemble the conditions for “previous accreditation” of programmes in education.

In conjunction with the Ministry of Education’s final recommendation, the CNA is responsible for both criteria and procedures to carry out this particular evaluation. To this point, 700 educational programmes have been awarded “previous accreditation”, which allows them to continue to enroll new students and to begin new academic programmes.

Furthermore, in addition to the control of minimum standards in certain selected study fields of public importance, there exists a National Commission for Master's and Doctorate programmes (CNDM) which is responsible for monitoring the development and operation of post-graduate programmes. The Commission, created in 1994, functions under the Colombian Institute for the Development of Higher Education (ICFES), and has the role of evaluating and approving applicants from institutions that seek to launch or continue to operate a Master's or PhD programme.

Finally, ICFES operates a mechanism for the supervision of institutions (general inspection). Its aim is to ensure that institutions comply with higher education requirements for basic safety and public service.

**Testing graduates through the ECES scheme**

Along the lines of a scheme that is in place in Brazil, in 2001 ICFES initiated a national examination of higher education graduates, from areas of health and mechanical engineering, through the implementation of an ECES (Exámenes de Calidad de la Educación Superior). This experimental examination was carried out on a voluntary basis for both the institutions and students. It is now
envisaged, however, to render it compulsory and to extend it to other fields of study. The system is intended to provide comparative information on outputs of HEIs in Colombia.

In conclusion, one can say that Colombia has been engaged to both develop instruments for quality assurance in higher education and to strengthen State policies concerned, considering that programmes (see above) will be submitted to a verification of mandatory minimum quality standards, and will be able to willingly carry out an evaluation of high quality levels within the framework of the National Accreditation System.
II. ORIGIN, CHARACTERISTICS AND METHODOLOGY OF THE NATIONAL ACCREDITATION SYSTEM

This case study focuses on one mechanism of quality assurance in Colombian higher education in particular – the Accreditation of Excellence – with special reference to academic programmes. The specificity of this mechanism is its voluntary nature and the intention to use it as a motivation for institutions to engage in a process of continuous quality improvement.

Origin of Accreditation of Excellence

Law 30 – 1992 established the National Accreditation System both as a tool to encourage the high quality of higher education and as a means to legitimate university autonomy.

As such, accreditation was conceived as a mechanism to promote the ongoing self-evaluation of institutions and programmes, the fulfillment of the institutional mission and project, the achievement of goals and objectives and, lastly, the identification of strengths and weaknesses of institutions participating in the process. Furthermore, accreditation endeavours to streamline the accountability of higher education towards society and the State. Accreditation also allows government to comply with its function of attesting the high quality of higher education institutions and programmes to the public.

In Colombia, the debate on evaluation tools and the recognition of higher education quality has lasted for over fifty years. Law 30 – 1992 envisaged it as a tool to encourage the quality of higher education through which institutions are willingly accountable to
society for the public education service they supply. Amongst others, Law 30, providing for higher education, sought to meet the following objectives: to set forth the conditions for higher education institutions to exercise responsible autonomy; to encourage the strengthening and the development of academic communities to make a meaningful contribution to the advancement of Colombian society; and to change the relationship between the State and Higher Education Institutions, helping them to become less regulatory and more result-oriented.

In Colombia, accreditation emerged from both the initiative of the academic community and as government policy. In the early nineties, through the Ministry of Education, the Government submitted a Bill of Law to Congress “to reorganize the country’s higher education”. This Bill was subjected to several lengthy debates and modified as a result. Finally, in December 1992, the Bill was enacted as Law, approved by the National Congress and sanctioned by the President of the Republic. The National Council of Accreditation (CNA) and the National Information System for Higher Education (SNIES) were created by virtue of this Law. To guide the Accreditation System, the Law entrusted the CNA with the task to lead and control the process of accreditation and to attest to the high quality of higher education programmes and institutions. The Law also established the National Council of Higher Education (CESU), as an advisory body to the Government, the purpose of which is to draw up all-embracing policies - such as accreditation - guiding higher education in the country.

Within this framework, the National Information System for Higher Education is responsible for informing society of the conditions functioning for the institutions and programmes. Both the Accreditation and Information Systems were thus engaged to foster quality and transparency and, through social control, to avoid any
possible excesses or confusion resulting from an eventually ill-devised or wrongly-administered autonomy.

Thus, accreditation emerged as a strategy to promote and recognize quality and as a tool to augment transparency and to help users make a more knowledgeable choice between different professional training offers on the basis of better criteria. Its goals – as set forth in this document – are additional arguments to sustain Accreditation. Others could be included, such as the efficiency of processes related to self-evaluation to improve quality and the increasing appropriation of a culture of evaluation by higher education institutions. This enhances transparency and lays the foundation for self-regulation as needed.

As pointed out in this document, certain members of the newly established National Council of Accreditation were acquainted with evaluation and accreditation experiences in several countries, such as Brazil, Canada, Chile, France, Mexico, United Kingdom and the United States. Others had taken part in previous evaluation processes of programmes and institutions in Colombia, first initiated by the National University Fund and then by ICFES. These experts – all academics – attended seminars and meetings on this issue that had been organized by the Ministry of Education and ICFES in previous years. Hence, the accreditation model designed by the National Council of Accreditation addresses both the country's specific characteristics of higher education and related policies as designed by CESU, and also gathers together self-evaluation with other evaluation processes at national and international levels, as well as universal principles of guiding higher education evaluation.

CESU and CNA are committed to the National Accreditation System and to the criteria and policies ruling it. CNA arranges and oversees the accreditation process, higher education institutions
with accredited programmes or with institutional accreditation and academic communities represented by peers appointed by the Council to perform external evaluation processes.

**Governance, responsibilities and functioning of CNA**

CNA is an autonomous governmental entity. Bearing in mind the fact that its task is to perform a technical evaluation of academic programmes that have demonstrably achieved high quality levels, it is directly linked to the Ministry of Education (MEN). Acting on behalf of the State, the Ministry publicly attests to the quality of programmes, but does this according to the recommendations made by CNA. CNA reports to CESU - since this entity appoints its members - and defines accreditation policies to be implemented by the former. As Technical Secretariat of CESU, ICFES provides logistical assistance and support. In addition, CNA has academic links with the Commission of Master's and Doctoral programmes (CNDM), with associations of Higher Education Institutions (Rectors' Councils), as well as with professional associations at departmental levels that bring together academic programmes with others in different areas of knowledge, as well as directly with universities, in particular with those undergoing the accreditation process.

The institutional framework of CNA is both straightforward and dynamic. As already mentioned, its membership consists of seven highly reputed academics that make decisions collectively, based on the recommendations for accreditation to be put to the Ministry. CNA members are appointed by CESU on the basis of a thorough perusal of résumés submitted by higher education institutions and other academic institutions and associations. The official announcement for submission of résumés is open and lists of criteria and requirements to be fulfilled by nominees are available. The Council
appoints, from within its members, a co-ordinator of two-day chair sessions held twice a month. The co-ordinator is also in charge of its institutional relationships.

The Council has its own headquarters and budget, appropriated on a yearly basis by the National Department of Planning and the Ministry of Finance. This budget is part of the Nation’s Budgetary Law, and is allocated as resources required for the “implementation of the National Accreditation System”. In compliance with CNA decisions, the Council’s budget is executed through ICFES. Currently, resources are assigned to the operating expenses of the Council, as well as to any other expenses involved in the visit for assessment of original conditions, which is made to an institution that applies for voluntary accreditation of its academic programmes. Moreover, the budget covers costs involved in seminars and workshops attended by Higher Education Institutions that deal with matters related to accreditation and evaluation, expenses resultant to information technology, dissemination of publications issued by CNA, and partial funding of self-evaluation projects towards accreditation, submitted by higher education institutions to CNA.

**Box 1. Organization and affiliation of CNA**
Box 2. Responsibilities and activities of the National Council of Accreditation (CNA) and of its Councillors

1. To promote and implement accreditation policies adopted by the National Council of Higher Education (CESU).
2. To co-ordinate accreditation processes (assessment of initial conditions, self-evaluation, external and final evaluation).
3. To adopt criteria, quality characteristics and tools used in the quality evaluation process.
4. To appoint academic peers to carry out the external evaluation process.
5. To perform a final evaluation on the basis of self- and external evaluations and remarks made by the institution to the peers’ report.
6. To issue a formal statement regarding the quality of programmes under evaluation, for submission to the Ministry of Education for it to attest to the quality of programmes and institutions concerned and to grant accreditation.
7. To solve inquiries made by academic peers and higher education institutions on accreditation-related matters.
8. To examine and approve proposal for co-financing of self-evaluation towards accreditation.

Councillors

The functions of the councillors are the following:

1. To examine the documentation related to assessment of initial conditions submitted to the CNA by institutions seeking to join the National Accreditation System. Furthermore, to report to the Council accordingly.
2. Members of the Council commissions to visit higher education institutions wanting to join the accreditation process in order to assess initial conditions. Furthermore, to report to the Council accordingly.

3. To train academic peer teams appointed by the Council.

4. To look into self-evaluation reports in order to verify compliance with criteria set forth by the Council.

5. As a preliminary activity to the Council’s final evaluation, to analyze self-evaluation and external evaluation reports, as well as remarks made by the institution concerning the peers’ report.

6. To be keynote speakers on issues related to higher education quality, self-evaluation and accreditation at seminars, workshops and other academic-type activities held by the Council itself, by educational institutions and by different organizations both at national and international levels.

The establishment of the Executive Secretariat had been for some time the concern of the Council and educational authorities. In March 2000, the CNA and the Ministry of Education finally reached a decision to make this a reality. The creation of the Executive Secretariat is deemed to be at the core of the Council mission because of the complexity of the implementation of a nationwide model for accreditation of programmes and institutions alike, and considering the growing number of programmes currently going through the various stages of the process. The intricacy of the task at hand is bound to increase due to Governmental decision to set the process of institutional accreditation into motion.

The Academic Analysis Group, along with members of the academic community designated by the Council, is charged to analyze the report and the auto-evaluation of programmes done by institutions
according to the initial conditions, in view of Accreditation of Excellence (conform to CNA protocol). The Group also examines documents on curricula projects conveyed by the IES to find basic quality standards for educational, health and engineering programmes. The visit from an external evaluation peer team and the activities of the special commission of academic peers are co-ordinated and the reports are analyzed according to the council’s protocol, which will designate academic peer groups for short periods of time. In accordance with requirements, they will be arranged according to disciplines, professions, and fields of work and/or type of Higher Education Institution. Their members will be chosen among national academic communities.

Whenever necessary, the Council hires external legal consultancy services without previously requiring a formal consultation with the Ministry of Education and/or ICFES Legal Bureau.

The Executive Secretariat of the National Council of Accreditation, among others, provides support to the CNA on the following issues:

- Analysis of documentation submitted to the Council by institutions pursuant to evaluation processes (Initial Conditions, Self-Evaluation, External Evaluation).
- Preparation of technical documents.
- Consolidation of peer databank. Training and follow-up of peer teams.
- Follow-up of programmes and institutions both accredited and going through the accreditation process.
- Seminars, meetings and other academic events to promote higher education quality, evaluation and accreditation.
- Identification of financial sources, budgetary allocation and disbursement.
The basic philosophy of Accreditation of Excellence

On the basis of accreditation policies designed by CESU, CNA devised the basic philosophy and the conceptual and methodological framework of Accreditation of Excellence. It aims at quality evaluation that has an all-encompassing impact on the various areas of institutional development, basically on those pertaining to the academic programme.

Accreditation policies as defined by CESU in 1995 are intended to strengthen the quality of higher education. Such policies, comprehensively brought together in the CNA model, could be consolidated as follows:

1. The starting point is that accreditation is based on the autonomy of a higher education institution and on the nature of higher education as a public service and, therefore, institutions themselves should become accountable for the improvement of the educational services they supply. A point is made in the sense that, as an instrument provided for by Law to promote the highest possible quality, the National Accreditation System should render its large potential available to institutions in order to contribute all of its components to the enhancement of quality. Taking advantage of their autonomy, and on a voluntary basis, institutions came to the decision to submit their academic programmes to the accreditation
process. Thus, these premises become evident insofar as the model evolves. To this day, 85 of a total of 313 higher education institutions have requested accreditation of 400 graduate programmes. Currently, the latter are gradually going through the different stages of the process. Also, they have begun to come to terms with their strengths and shortcomings, to take advantage of external peer expertise and to grow qualitatively through a relentless endeavour to reach optima proposed by CNA. Moreover, they come to share their own, and learn from other institutional experiences and, last but not least, once the process is over, they are accountable to society and the State insofar as the public educational service they provide is concerned.

2. Due regard to the institution’s objectives and identity is encouraged, while plurality and diversity of programmes and institutions is stressed. By perceiving the institutional mission and project as institutional components of accreditation, the CNA model makes this guiding principle possible. The model puts forward quality characteristics as optima to be achieved, in line with the type of institution and kind of programme, thus acknowledging underlying diversity and plurality as required.

3. As already mentioned, Accreditation of Excellence does not seek to supersede supervision and oversight, neither does it purport to guarantee compliance to minimum quality requirements. As already mentioned (see above) there are different mechanisms for supervision and oversight. Accreditation of Excellence is expected to provide motivation to persevere towards even a higher level of quality; as such it is useful in strengthening the self-regulation capacity of institutions willing to go through the process.

4. It is evident that accreditation should be based on parameters clearly defined by CNA and that compliance to them should lead to
the ongoing enhancement of quality. As already explained, the CNA model has pointed out quality criteria and characteristics; also, it has put forward a series of variables and indicators and has proposed procedural guidelines for each phase of the process. While committing themselves to high quality and accountability, institutions are also putting forth both efforts and resources to streamline strengths and overcome shortcomings of their programmes. Higher Education Institutions should take into account the outcome of self-evaluation, i.e. to provide guidance for decision-making for planning, administration and management, so as to make sure that necessary changes are implemented.

5. Likewise, CESU policies set forth that programmes should be the first object of accreditation and acknowledge the fact that institutional accreditation goes beyond the straightforward aggregate of accredited programmes. Furthermore, they depend on Higher Education Institutions to determine that the self-evaluation process becomes dynamic, reliable, responsible, in-depth, open and able to positively view both wise moves and mistakes. These policies also advise academic peers to make sure that the external evaluation examines the relevance, truthfulness and effectiveness of the internal process, and that it considers the impact of the programme and the institutional self-evaluation in the light of quality criteria and relies on the support of instruments as defined by CNA. The above-mentioned policies request CNA to attest to the quality of institutions and programmes and to recommend them for accreditation to the Ministry of Education, upon an in-depth quality evaluation, those who have proved that they have achieved the requirements of high quality.

6. Finally, the National Council of Higher Education recommends that growth targets be set regarding programmes yet to fulfill
requirements for accreditation. CESU points out that the accreditation process should provide society with basic, necessary and reliable information on programmes that institutions have willingly submitted for and obtained accreditation status. In this way, they will provide students with information on accredited institutions or programmes. It also stresses the fact that accreditation should publicly acknowledge the outstanding characteristics of the institution and programmes. Also, whenever quality evaluation processes do not lead up to accreditation, the institution concerned should be informed confidentially of detected shortcomings, in order for necessary action to be taken.

7. In accordance with accreditation policies set forth by the CESU, it was decided to initiate the Accreditation of Excellence at the programme level instead of at the institutional level. This strategic decision found its roots mainly in the wide-reaching impact this type of process usually has. Its objective was to make sure that in each institution quality of education could be achieved through academic staff committed to the promotion of a culture concerned with systematic evaluation of disciplinary and professional paradigms in each graduate academic programme.

To this day, seven years after the mechanism for Accreditation of Excellence was implemented at the programme level, the National Council of Accreditation has also completed the development of the model for institutional accreditation. Indeed, seven processes of institutional evaluation were started in 2002 and the institutions involved have already completed their self-study process. The tool for institutional accreditation has also been developed to acknowledge high quality levels of entire institutions and is based on in-depth consultation with managerial staff and academics attached to the different types of higher education institutions existing in Colombia. The model was then officially submitted to
the National Government. CNA has started to disseminate the model at regional seminars currently being held throughout the country.

Despite meaningful similarities with programme accreditation in respect of its philosophy and formulation (volontariat, temporality, standards for high quality, three-stage process, i.e.: self-evaluation, peer evaluation and final evaluation by the CNA), institutional accreditation thus emerges as a way to support and supplement programme accreditation. Furthermore, distinct features regarding specific goals, meaning, scope, emphasis and areas to be evaluated are also present.

8. The experience so far gained by the accreditation of programmes has become an excellent opportunity for institutions and their academic staff to have access to an evaluation and quality culture, an ongoing learning experience to enhance their task and to open new opportunities for the discussion of strengths and weaknesses of academic programmes and of the institution as a whole. This new mechanism allows institutions to make sound intelligent decisions to improve their service.

9. Ever since its inception, accreditation has referred to both institutions and programmes. However, and bearing in mind the above arguments, National Council of Accreditation adopted the CESU proposal to initiate accreditation activities by programmes, i.e.:

- Even though high quality should be reasonably expected from academic programmes offered by well-known higher education institutions, a large diversity is common amongst them. Therefore, for want of an accreditation culture, institutional accreditation could lead users to reach the conclusion that all programmes have attained similar levels of excellence.
• Academic communities with the capacity to assess quality of most programmes are present in the country. Nevertheless, on the basis of accreditation proper, the debate on the evaluation of higher education institutions has increasingly taken hold, more competent and informed experts teams are now in place, and draw from their own experience in programme evaluation to make an overall assessment of quality and relevance of institutions.
III. DESCRIPTION OF THE METHODOLOGY AND THE INSTRUMENTS USED FOR ACCREDITATION OF EXCELLENCE

The basic process of Accreditation of Excellence in Colombia is similar to that used in other countries. The whole process is based on pre-designed factors and standards, called characteristics. Self- and external evaluations are made referring to these quality definitions. Accreditation standards describe desirable levels of quality. The factors and characteristics (the optimal quality level) are the same for all institutions and programmes, be they technical training institutions or professional or technical programmes.

Quality guidelines and characteristics

Once the accreditation model was developed and published in Lineamientos para la Acreditación\(^4\) (Accreditation Guidelines), CNA disseminated and discussed its contents with numerous decision-makers and academics from different fields of knowledge (Health: Medicine, Dentistry, Nursing; Engineering, Architecture, Law, Education, etc.) from Colombian higher education institutions. These discussions allowed for a consensus to be reached regarding criteria, characteristics and remaining model components, as well as the methodology to be applied. Originally, this ongoing dissemination and the discussions helped enrich and enhance the proposal and has since become a tool to ensure the model’s legitimacy.

Quality is at the heart of the accreditation model. *Lineamientos para la Acreditación*, relevant to academic programmes, defines quality as the integration of *sixty-six characteristics* merged into seven wide-reaching *factors*, which follow:

1. **Institutional project.** Eleven quality characteristics are attached to this factor, referring to the mission statement, aims and institutional project that represent the driving force behind teaching, research, social relevance, institutional welfare, resources, administration and programme management.

2. **Students and teachers.** This factor’s sixteen characteristics refer to (universal and fair) mechanisms used to enroll students in programmes, to the relationship between the size of the student body and the enrolment capacity of both the programme and the institution, to student drop-out rates, to the comprehensive evaluation of students, to students and teachers by-laws and regulations etc.. Moreover, they refer to academic systems in force for the selection of teachers and researchers, to quality, number and commitment of teachers, teaching, research, and student assistance and advisory activities. They also concern faculty evaluation systems, in which academic production and performance as regards teaching and research activities should be fundamental criteria, and to the involvement of teachers and students in research activities, in accordance with the type of institution and kind of programme, to teachers’ development policies and programmes, to their interaction with both the national and international communities and, lastly, to teacher training and professional development.

3. **Academic processes.** The fifteen characteristics associated to this factor deal with curricular flexibility and consistency, curriculum contribution to the students’ comprehensive education,
relevance of knowledge, methodology and basic principles of the discipline, profession and field of work of graduate students. These characteristics also refer to interdisciplinarity to approach certain topics, with methodologies applied to develop the curriculum's contents, evaluation systems, programme research activities and their impact on the programme itself and on the surrounding environment, and with its involvement in relevant research centres.

4. **Institutional welfare.** The five characteristics involved in this particular factor point to the assessment of the institutional environment and its contribution to personal and group growth, to the composition of an academic community, and to the type and appropriateness of welfare services offered to the university community.

5. **Organization, administration and management.** Seven characteristics are attached to this factor that permit the assessment of the administrative support provided to teaching and research activities, and to the programme's social relevance, to information and communication systems and to the leadership and managerial capacity involved in the programme.

6. **Graduate students and their impact on the environment.** The three characteristics involved in this factor relate to the impact of the programme on its environment, to mechanisms to solve contextual problems from an academic stance, to the ability to integrate the outcome of environmental problems into curricula, to the follow-up of activities developed by graduate students, to the awareness of the quality of education, as well as to the performance of students participating in the programme to be accredited.
7. **Physical and financial resources**. Eight characteristics are linked to this factor. They all concern the sufficiency and suitable use of facilities, the quality and updating of bibliographic resources, laboratory and equipment supplies, supporting learning material and adequate recreational and sports facilities. They also refer to current and future access to financial resources and to their availability to ensure the programme’s proper operation and investment.

*Appendix 2* presents a full list of the factors and characteristics used for *Accreditation of Excellence*.

When characteristics are defined to achieve the optimum desired in any programme, they allow various programmes of a similar kind to be distinguished from each other, as they get closer or further from the ideal situation of a study programme often defined some time in the past. Quality characteristics have been set up to make explicit relevant issues, thus contributing to a more thorough and exhaustive understanding of quality.

A series of qualitative and quantitative variables were spelled out for the evaluation of a characteristic. These *variables* are appraised on the basis of *indicators*.

Thus, by means of consecutive syntheses, the indicators allow for the evaluation of variables that provide the basis for an assessment of characteristics that judge academic programmes as a whole.

Bearing in mind that the CNA accreditation model seeks to promote high levels of quality, its design is not based on pre-defined quality standards; rather, quality characteristics were put forward. As already mentioned, the latter are optima towards which programmes and institutions should strive. Each of the 66 quality
characteristics encompassed in the programme accreditation model is precisely expressed in CNA guidelines, which describes moreover its own meaning and suggests its own set of variables and indicators.

Box 3. Example of spelling out a characteristic into variables and indicators

Characteristic 16

In compliance with institutional objectives and relevant programme specificities, faculty size is adequate and teachers have both the commitment and training the programme requires.

Description

It points to the fact that, to achieve the institution and programme objectives, the required number of teachers should be available, their level of qualification appropriate and their commitment to the institution and to the programme in question adequate. Likewise, efforts are made to find out whether the number of teachers attached to the programme and their training and commitment come close to the ideal situation sought after for the specific programme and institution. The above examines the quality of education offered in one of its core aspects.

Variables

Adequacy to programme requirements of faculty commitment and of their specific training and level of qualification.

Academic quality of faculty attached to the programme.

Indicators

1) Training (graduate, postgraduate, Master's, Doctoral), rating on the promotion ladder and commitment of teachers to institution and programme.
2) Other educational experiences of teachers relevant to their performance in the programme.

3) Period of time teachers have worked in the institution and programme, as well as any other academic and professional experiences of faculty involved.

4) Relationship between the number of students enrolled in a programme and the number of teachers involved. A comparison should be established with regard to full-time commitment.

5) Assessment by outstanding members of academic communities of faculty committed to programme.

6) Assessment of programme students with regard to both the quality and sufficiency of the number of students enrolled, and of the commitment of teachers involved in the programme.

Later in 2001, a new paper, Lineamientos para la Acreditación Institucional⁵ (Institutional Accreditation Guidelines), was submitted to the academic community and to managerial staff of higher education institutions for their perusal and analysis.

As far as institutional accreditation is concerned, the factors cover more or less the same areas as in programme accreditation but emphasize the institution as a whole; they concentrate on the mission and projects and on the entire institutional capacity. The main factors are: Mission, Teachers and Students, Academic processes, Research, Social impact and Relevance, Self-evaluation and Self-regulation, Institutional Welfare, Organization, Administration and Management, Physical Facilities and Financial and Physical Resources. There are altogether ten factors and 33 characteristics in institutional

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accreditation and two areas (research and self-evaluation/self-regulation) which are not included in programme accreditation factors. The purpose of the factors is to promote a culture of self-evaluation in the institution.

Programme accreditation promotes high institutional quality, whereas institutional accreditation stimulates programme accreditation and thus the two are fully complementary.

The accreditation model points out a series of appraisal criteria. Not only do they guide CNA’s task, and that of external evaluators involved in the process, but they also make up core principles to identify the quality of institutions and programmes. The following criteria are used:

- Universality
- Integrity
- Fairness
- Competence
- Accountability
- Congruence
- Transparency
- Relevance
- Efficacy
- Efficiency

Despite the analytical nature of the model, the fact should be underlined that quality is not conceived as a simple aggregate of characteristics, but rather in a holistic position in which significant relationships amongst various issues are important. In the meantime, the institution is thought of as an entity in which congruity of tasks and commitment is essential. Here links are paramount: between those who take part in the process, between the institution and its framework, and between the institution’s faculty and national and international academic communities.
The programme accreditation process in operation

To begin the accreditation process, the rector or legal representative of the institution makes a formal statement with regard to the awareness of the institution of “Lineamientos para la acreditación”. He/she then states that the institution complies with certain basic conditions, as defined by the Council, and requests the latter to subject specific graduate programmes to accreditation. Afterwards, he/she delivers, as requested, documents containing data relevant to the twelve Original Conditions. In December 1996, the Council admitted the first request of a university to willingly submit its graduate programmes to the accreditation process.

Box 4. Testing of original conditions. The following twelve original conditions refer to different institutional issues that are comprehensibly assessed. They are as follows:

1. Authorization to operate granted by the Colombian State to the higher education institution.
2. Compliance with regulations enacted by State with regard to higher education.
3. Definition and creation of a mission addressing meaningful guidelines congruent with the institution’s nature and corresponding to the programme activities.
4. Design of an institutional project that indicates purposes, objectives, goals and strategies to be implemented.
5. Compliance with requirements related to the competence of teachers, faculty size and their commitment to teaching, research and activities.
6. Enforcement of by-laws and regulations pertaining to teachers and students, and including policies relevant to hiring and selection of teachers, students admission, responsibilities and
rights of teachers and students, and the share-in system used in the institutional managerial structure.

7. Adequate standing and tradition of the programme submitted for accreditation.

8. Organizational structure, congruent both with the institution’s nature and with administration and management systems.


10. Financial strength and proper use of resources.


12. The evidence that the institution has not been penalized due to non-compliance of legal provisions ruling higher education within the last five-year period.

The assessment of the *Original Conditions* does not entail a formal stage of the accreditation process. These Conditions are meant to ensure that CNA estimates as advisable to examine and assess the institution before formally going into the accreditation process. The purpose of the Conditions is both to allow for a preliminary overview of the institution as a whole, and, on the basis of substantive information, to become aware of its orientation, background, stability and level of academic, administrative and resource development. In order to do so, CNA peruses through the material submitted by the institution that has willingly submitted programmes to accreditation. The institution concerned must verify its compliance with the twelve original conditions mentioned.

A committee made up of Council members then visits the institution and meets its representatives from various university bodies, assesses compliance with conditions mentioned and discusses
how successfully the institution could carry forward the accreditation process. Provided the institution is in a position to go ahead with the process, a timetable is fixed to carry out the self-evaluation of programmes submitted for quality evaluation and to deliver self-evaluation reports to CNA. From then onwards, the institution becomes the subject of follow-up activities by CNA.

During the two-day visit to the institution, the Council committee members meet with academic and managerial staff, teachers, students, graduates and employees to examine more closely any critical issues that CNA has brought to light. A visit is made to libraries, laboratories, workshops, computer infrastructure, research centres, classrooms, auditoria, welfare facilities and services, work places and sport and recreation fields. Once the visit is completed, strengths and shortcomings are discussed with management and overall recommendations are made for improvement.

**Self-evaluation**

*Self-evaluation* is the first formal step of accreditation. Throughout this stage, the institutions must abide by CNA criteria and instruments, as stated in *Lineamientos para la acreditación* (Accreditation Guidelines) and in *Guía para la autoevaluación de programas de pregrado*7 (Guidelines for Self-evaluation of Graduate Programmes). This Guide addresses the different types of institutions and programmes, includes orientations, organizational suggestions and suggests information and instrument sources to carry out the self-evaluation process and to prepare the corresponding report (see *Box 5*). It is expected that the outcome of self-evaluation will be instrumental to accreditation purposes and to articulate actions to

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enhance quality of academic programmes and the educational public service they provide.

Prior to evaluation, factors and characteristics embodied in the CNA accreditation model must undergo the contrasting recognition of their relative importance (weighting), as features useful for quality assessment. Such processes should be performed by the academic community attached to the programme in the self-evaluation stage and by academic peers involved with external evaluation.

Throughout the self-evaluation process, the institution itself must look into quality criteria and, as a matter of course, this activity must go hand in hand with transparency, truthfulness and honesty of people involved. The experience arising from this process shows to what point institutional management has fulfilled its leadership role from the very moment the institution willingly took the decision to submit its programmes to the accreditation process. This activity aims to achieve sufficient consensus and participation from the university community to successfully carry out such a complex task.

Below is an example that illustrates how further guidance is provided to institutions for self-evaluation. In addition to detailing the characteristics, variables and indicators, other elements are also highlighted, such as sources of information, documentary evidence and institutional players to be interviewed that can also be consulted to assess the value to be allocated for each indicator.
Box 5. Example of guidance provided for self-evaluation

Characteristic 28

The study plan ensures training in knowledge, methods and basic principles of action of the respective discipline, profession, occupation or trade and is coherent with the objectives of the institution and its programme and corresponding fields of work of graduates.

Description

Its aim is to find out whether programme objectives and field of work intended through training are clearly defined; whether the study plan corresponds to training required by degrees awarded and also includes the knowledge and skills required by the professional community involved, as well as those needed to fulfil current expectations of professional work. Also, its purpose is to find out whether the focus and training offered by the programme match the educational project and whether arrangement of the programme contents corresponds to the sequencing, as expressed in previous requirements of subject matters.

Variables

1. Clarity in programme objectives and in the definition of field of work to be achieved through specific training.
2. Coherence between programme contents and methods. Awareness of the fact that corresponding academic community accepts and demands them.
3. Harmony between the institution's educational project and the programme's objectives, methods and contents.
4. Correspondence between the programme objectives and the selection, hierarchic arrangement and sequential arrangement of contents.
5. Adequacy of contents and methods of study plan to provide the training the title awarded implies.
6. Updating of programme in accordance with its own characteristics and incorporation of modifications addressing changes occurring in the corresponding field of work.

### Indicators

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Sources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Documents of programme introduction and description.</td>
<td>A B C D E F G H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Evaluation of faculty and students related to the clarity of professional outlets for graduates and goals and objectives of programme.</td>
<td>A B C D E F G H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Verifiable information on comparison made by institution between contents and methods of programme with other programmes with similar training objectives recognized in their field and at national and international level.</td>
<td>A B C D E F G H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Assessment by area Faculty and well-known professionals regarding validity of contents and methods.</td>
<td>A B C D E F G H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Assessment by graduates of adequacy of contents and methods.</td>
<td>A B C D E F G H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Verifiable information on criteria used to design study plan.</td>
<td>A B C D E F G H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Assessment by senior-year programme students of selection, hierarchical and sequential organization of contents.</td>
<td>A B C D E F G H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Verifiable information on components of the educational project of the institution attached to objectives, methods and contents of programme.</td>
<td>A B C D E F G H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Documents on last modification of programme.</td>
<td>A B C D E F G H</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Column A: Director of Programme**
**Column B: Director other departments**
**Column C: Professors**
**Column D: Students**
**Column E: Employees**
**Column F: Graduates**
**Column G: Employers**
**Column H: Governmental agencies and others**

I = Interview-based consultation; D = Documentary information; N = Numerical information; O = Other; S = Survey; W = Workshop
Each institution devises its own self-evaluation model, both at institutional level and in each programme submitted to accreditation. A typical self-evaluation would relate to the quality and self-evaluation policy set forth by the Academic Council or Board of Directors of the higher education institution. From the operational viewpoint, such a typical arrangement is a team effort, members of which belong to the academic community, leading the process in different programmes and organizational levels. The creation of a core group for the co-ordination of self-evaluation is the first step. Its members come from managerial staff and academics of high standing within the university community. A second group, in close working co-operation with the former, deals with each programme the institution has submitted to accreditation. Their own institution has trained the members of these groups in the awareness and management of Accreditation Guidelines and all other CNA instruments, as well as in techniques of evaluation, information processing and analysis. Additionally, they have stressed the importance and need of the availability of sufficient, reliable and straightforward information. Likewise, they have gained enough background experience in the handling of electronic files and relevant information.

Additionally, institutions have already developed strategies to supply teachers, students, management and employees both with information related to models and policies of self-evaluation and the timetable to implement activities. Decisions taken by institutional management as well as the strategies devised and implemented within the institutional framework succeeded in overcoming original constraints and in achieving internal agreements with members of the different university bodies with a view to marshalling important sectors of the institutional community around the self-evaluation process.

University management leads the way and encourages participation and commitment by university bodies. Also, they allocate
financial resources to implement the self-evaluation process and to carry out transitional proposals they have committed themselves to.

Academic working groups entrusted with the task to lead and guide the self-evaluation process within the institution discuss and reflect on obstacles and weaknesses. They suggest solutions and coordinate strategies intended to bring about changes deemed necessary to enhance quality. Time required to accomplish this activity ranges between ten and fourteen months per programme. On the basis of the experience gained, it is expected that the duration of the self-evaluation process involving other institutional programmes could be shortened in the future. When the process comes to its conclusion, academic working groups prepare a self-evaluation report that captures the outcome of quality analyses and criteria related to characteristics and factors, as well as the overall assessment of the programme quality.

Institutions may assign a numerical grade to each characteristic which will indicate if the characteristic is: A: Fully achieved, B: Achieved to a high degree, C: Acceptable achievement, D: Unsatisfactory achievement, E: Non-achieved. They can also assign their own weight to each characteristic indicating the degree of importance they attribute to it.

The (rightly asserted) weighting of characteristics and factors, the outcome of quality analyses and criteria, the quality of characteristics, factors and the programme as a whole, are recorded in the self-evaluation report (its main body should not exceed 100 pages in length). Moreover, the report records strengths and shortcomings of every programme-related issue (see Boxes 6 and 7). Once they are being applied, corrective measures are also recorded in the report, as are proposals for action to overcome hindrances and to improve the programme concerned qualitatively.
Box 6. Weighting example

Non-numerical grading systems can be used. For example, characteristics can be arranged by order of importance with regard to the overall evaluation of the programme quality or within the factor they belong to. If such discrimination between characteristics of similar importance is not intended, they could be classified by order of their relative importance in a few groups.

Also, in order to estimate how close characteristics are to the ideal goal, non-numerical scales could be used, i.e.,

A: Fully achieved  
B: Achieved to a high degree  
C: Acceptable achievement  
D: Unsatisfactory achievement  
E: Non-achieved.

Also, numerical weights, such as those contained in the following table, could be used. They correspond to hypothetical situations, in which characteristics are defined by a number and are arbitrarily grouped together in factors. It should be stressed that this type of weighting is not the only method.

In the above example, characteristics 9 and 13 have been given a weighting equal to 10. However, characteristic 9 has been marked with an asterisk to point out its critical importance to quality evaluation. If this characteristic is not reasonably complied with, it may be concluded that the programme has not reached a high quality level.

As already stated, Procedural Guidelines suggest that a qualitative grading should be made for evaluation purposes. However, to expand on the examples we have just given, let us suppose that the compliance of each characteristic is graded within a 0 to 5 scale. Thus, and if we used the focus to weight the importance of characteristics as regards the overall quality of the programme under review, a hypothetical situation could be arrived at through the evaluation process, such as the following table.
Description of the methodology and the instruments used for Accreditation of Excellence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Weighting of relative importance compared to total from characteristic weighting, expressed as set ratios</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 to 10 scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<td>Total A</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>Total C</td>
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<td>Total D</td>
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<td>E</td>
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<td>E</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total E</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor</td>
<td>Characteristic</td>
<td>Weighting of relative importance compared to total 1 to 10 scale</td>
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<tr>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>67</td>
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</table>
For each characteristic, the same weighting result (column 3) has been used in this example. The column headed “Degree of Compliance” (4), refers to the estimation made of every characteristic, of how close the programme is to its full compliance. A 5 grading is the recognition that this optimum has been achieved. To measure the weight that each characteristic has in a real situation, and towards the final impact of assessing quality, the relative merit assigned to characteristics is taken into account, i.e., their weighting (column 3) and the grading of compliance of each one of them (column 4). The outcome of this process is the evaluation referred to in column 5, which ultimately is the multiplication of values stated in column 3 by those stated in column 4. For each characteristic, column 6 shows the ideal grading that could be achieved; i.e., the maximum possible grade (5) multiplied by each weighting value (column 3). Lastly, to arrive at the closeness of each characteristic to the ideal (and by derivation in the set) the ratio is calculated between the value obtained through the evaluation (column 5) and the corresponding ideal value (column 6). These ratios are shown in column 7 as “ideal achievement ratios”. If this outcome is to be expressed as a percentage of ideal achievement, then the values of column 7 could be multiplied by 100.

The importance of weighting is stressed in the above examples. If disregarded, the final outcome, i.e., the closeness to obtaining the ideal achievement, would have been 0.57 instead of 0.45.

Characteristics deemed as critical to the overall evaluation of quality have been pointed out in the above examples. As stated in the third edition of Lineamientos para la Acreditación and in Guía para la Evaluación Externa, weighting of these characteristics is paramount to support evaluation of quality of a given programme. Its value could go even beyond what the relative weight assigned to them in the numerical example above suggests.

External evaluation

The academic peer team that is appointed by CNA to carry out the External Evaluation sets forth quality criteria. Upon their visit to the institution, peers verify fairness and truthfulness of the self-evaluation, and supplement it, taking into account issues that may have been overlooked by the institution that could be essential to the programme quality appraisal. Also, they inquire into critical issues that the preliminary analysis of documentation has brought to light. The activity is concluded by an external evaluation report, which the academic peer team delivers to the Council. In additional, the team makes a critical analysis of issues such as self-evaluation, quality characteristics as defined in the model, spells out an unreserved assessment of the programme quality and, furthermore, makes recommendations deemed relevant to enhance the programme or institution in question.

Peers involved in external evaluation must be highly regarded both as individuals capable of reaching conclusions on the quality of education offered by the programme, and experts that are concerned with the performance of future graduates from the programme under peer evaluation.

The term “peer”, however, is not tantamount to “equal”. An accreditation peer is entrusted with the authority to pass judgment. A significant constituent of his/her legitimacy relates to the fact that he/she is acknowledged like a paradigm, as an example to his/her community. Furthermore, the peer is such whenever he/she is aware of the knowledge and action involved in the discipline, profession, line of work, or trade of quality under evaluation. This signifies that the peer must be acquainted with the relevant “paradigm” (Kuhn), or “disciplinary matrix” involved in the discipline concerned. “La
evaluación externa en el contexto de la acreditación en Colombia”8 (External Evaluation within the Framework of Accreditation in Colombia) – prepared by CNA in view of providing conceptual support both to institutions and peer teams – suggests the term “paradigm” to explain knowledge and action as pertaining to a disciplinary or professional community. Moreover, in order to widen the scope of the notion beyond disciplines, the actual mobility of types of knowledge is incorporated and used to identify what the expert community shares in the field of action of a given programme.

While their contents and guiding principles are inherently different (for example, psychology), programme names may overlap each other and should be borne in mind at when peers are appointed. Likewise, it is of paramount importance that the external peers be well aware of the educational proposal for the programme under evaluation. Furthermore, he/she must be highly regarded by the teaching community of the institution’s programme considering his/her competence.

It is an uphill task for a single individual to be acquainted with all issues involved in the qualitative aspects of a programme. Therefore, it is essential for people responsible for external evaluation to make up a team to allow for the presence of a collective peer with the capacity to assess not only core knowledge and teaching strategies, but also the legitimacy of approaches in place. this aggregate of team skills renders possible the warrant of greater “fairness” of assessment, in the presence of more knowledge and an agreement between multiple points of view.

Box 7. Grading and weighting in self-evaluation and external evaluation processes

Both grading and weighting processes refer to the self-evaluation and the external evaluation processes. As mentioned in the main document, weighting allows for the recognition of the relative importance of the parts making up the whole and, thus, it is a tool to acknowledge the specificity of the institution and the programme concerned. Also, through their historical evaluation, the different paradigms present in disciplines and professions alike have defined core characteristics that, even though they should be taken into consideration by the self-evaluation process, are basic to the external evaluation process. Although the institution is well aware of its identity and the mission guiding it, it should also take into consideration universal demands for quality in the fields of training it offers. Peers intimately know the overall needs of its paradigms but should also look after its specific referents. Different weighting could then be derived from such distinct emphasis. When the CNA renders its final evaluation, it should take into account these two viewpoints.

Grading allows recognizing and making explicit the level of achievement of each characteristic. Even though grading scales are not necessarily universal in the self-evaluation process, they allow differences to be established in levels of achievement. The whole process, implying evaluation by external peers and by the CNA, would allow determination of whether quality levels required by accreditation have been obtained.

As pointed out in the main document, the CNA has stressed the fact that grading and weighting is a meaningful endeavour to establish differences in order of importance; however, universal
evaluation under consideration is chiefly qualitative. We should not forget that the model explicitly calls for different ways to weight and grade characteristics that, because of their relative value, could be deemed of mandatory compliance to ensure high quality levels required.

We could, then, infer that, even though they are not necessarily coincident in these two different accreditation stages, grading and weighting in self-evaluation and external evaluation processes play a role to classify and differentiate programmes and institutions. This should not mean trouble. Rather, it could mean that the timing is right for a beneficial dialogue between the two points of view and, furthermore, insofar as weighting and grading should be warranted, the relative distance permits awareness of core specificities and nuances in an evaluation process that is responsive to differences existing in between different training projects.

Peers should be able to assess both quality and relevance of the programme in question, as well as the legitimacy and seriousness of focus on distinct fields of practice and quality of programmes that even take over original approaches. As a matter of fact and, though the peer does not know everything (even with the team), he/she is endowed with basic knowledge allowing him/her to assess the soundness of different proposals.

Peers belong to what could be referred to as the “academic community” of the discipline, profession, line of work, or trade in question. Such a community is the body of field experts who know the foundations, methods and techniques, who are aware of the problems graduate students must face in principle and of possible areas for professional work, as well as major changes the activity is
subjected to. Not only are those performing in the field truly able to make a contribution to an intelligent assessment, when an evaluation is made of different engineering fields, CNA has deemed it proper for team membership to include experts in the field of sciences.

In principle, peers should be endowed with assets such as: competence, integrity, universality, acceptance of others, flexibility and discipline, ability for criticism, mind-set towards communication and consensus, discretion and responsibility.

Peers perform their assessment on the basis both of the “paradigm” they are acquainted with as experts and the model devised by CNA, starting from the review of the self-evaluation report, and from findings arising from the peer visit to the institution. Amongst other things, such an analysis helps to compare different points of view with the contents of the report in mention.

It is worthwhile to point out that peers do not represent institutions – they are experts, not advocates, of a given paradigm, neither do they have, or are due to have within a year, any contractual links with the institution concerned.

As outstanding teachers, researchers or professionals, peers should view the external evaluation as an advantageous event to bring out the strengths and shortcomings of the academic programme under accreditation, and to play a role in the enhancement of its quality. When performing as a team, peers should work within an ethical framework so as to warrant an adequate balance and fairness in their assessment of the evaluated programme quality.

Furthermore, the Council is currently gathering a bank of candidates to perform as peers and a bank of peers at national and international level. CNA task is supported by the institutions and by academic and professional communities. On the basis of the
information supplied by the former and with the highest possible thoroughness, the Council reviews candidate résumés and appoints peer team members accordingly.

With a view to supporting the work of peers and to provide guidance to institutions, the Council prepared the Guía para la Evaluación Externa (Guidelines for External Evaluation), referred to above, as well as an analytical document on the subject. Additionally, CNA provides peers with guidance by means of formal introductory sessions held before the external evaluation visit is made.

During the introductory process, peers are asked to determine both when and why a programme could be deemed as a high-quality programme and to clearly state their arguments in the external evaluation report (which the institution concerned shall review and reply to). Thus, the Council uses the report as an argument to discuss the programme quality and to have enough facts at its disposal to enable it to make a decision on the accreditation to be granted and on the period of time for which this accreditation shall be in force.

Also, it is made clear throughout the introductory phase that in no case whatsoever are peers allowed to perform the Council duties, neither can they point out whether or not accreditation should be granted. Even less, they would not be allowed to pinpoint the period of enforcement of the accreditation. What matters to CNA assessment are the supporting documents and arguments set forth within the reports, even more than the grading by peers in their external evaluation report, or by the institution in its self-evaluation report.

In order for peers to be able to reach consensus on argumentative grounds, they are advised to discuss their points of view amongst themselves, and to create a niche for dialogue in their visit agendas.
The external evaluation visit ends with a meeting of peers with the institution’s managerial staff. At this meeting, the findings related to programme strengths and shortcomings are discussed. These findings are the key to CNA assessment and a significant feature to uphold such an assessment.

Peers should explicitly acknowledge the fact that the legitimacy of the entire process rests with them. As far as institutions are concerned, the participation of peers does not entail a short-lived quality evaluation activity, but rather both a significant source of suggestions for improvement and a knowledgeable outlook enabling them to spell out a course of action and to direct attainable developments on the basis of the disclosure of strengths and shortcomings.

The fact is stressed during the introductory process – peers should be well aware of the fact that their mission is to assess quality levels attained by the programme within the overall objective to improve quality. Their work is not only useful to look into the compliance of certain quality levels but it is also instrumental in the process of improvement of quality of programmes, institutions and of the system as a whole. Thus, not only are deficiencies corrected, but likely solutions to detected problems are discussed.

Furthermore, peers are advised to make an overall assessment of the compliance with the quality characteristics to the model on the basis of their examination. Such an assessment should not be the mechanical aggregate of partial evaluations, but should take into account the total number of factors, combining both the programme characteristics and quality.

The meeting with peers is not only considered as the opportunity to give instructions, but as the possibility to set forth the core
principles of accreditation before standing members of academic communities who provide strategic support to the improvement of educational quality in their field of work. Moreover, the peers should not perform their duties out of obligation or seeking monetary recognition. (On account of their personal qualities, they are granted larger monetary recognition for work requiring similar commitment).

To be an academic peer is to be awarded recognition for personal academic achievements and leadership.

In the face of the above reflections, the Council is willing to learn from the interpretation and analysis of external evaluation reports prepared by peer teams.

**Final evaluation**

Once acquainted with the External Evaluation Report, the Council delivers it to the institution for review with the specific request that to the Council be informed of their remarks on the report. Only once the institution makes its remarks known to the Council, does the latter begin the stage known as *final evaluation* of the programme quality, on the basis of the outcome of both the self- and external evaluations and the assessment results of the peer report made by the institution (see *Appendix 3*).

The Council assessment of the programme quality is rendered in a technical report including the programme strengths and shortcomings, a recommendation on the accreditation enforcement period (not less than three years and not more than ten years). Then, this report is delivered to the Ministry of Education with a request for it to issue the *Accreditation Act*. 
If the assessment of the Council is unsatisfactory, recommendations are then made and submitted to the institution on a basis of confidentiality. A two-year period must elapse between the time of final evaluation and submission by the institution – if so it decides – of its programme to another accreditation process, provided it has implemented actions according to the recommendations made by CNA (see Box 8).

Strengths of accredited programmes are disseminated through the National Information System of Higher Education (SNIES), attached to ICFES, and through media available to CNA to inform the academic community and society as a whole on programmes and institutions who have become members of the National Accreditation System.

The body of programmes granted accreditation on account of their high quality shows a range of strengths that could be summarized as follows:

- A sense of self-criticism that facilitates changes and promotes self-evaluation.
- Appropriate faculty size, training, commitment and sense of belongingness.
- Sufficiently flexible curriculum oriented towards comprehensive education.
- Research activities in place.
- Positive impact on the environment.
- Articulation with the institution’s project and mission.
- Adequate institutional environment and appropriate university welfare services.

• Appropriate physical facilities and academic supporting resources.
• Appropriate support of bibliographical, computer and teaching resources.
• Programmes’ tradition.
• Managerial staff providing support to self-evaluation and to quality improvement plans.
• Equity in admission and enforcement of duties and rights granted to students.

In Colombia, accreditation covers a rather wide range of programmes and must account for a large variety of institutions. This fact makes it difficult to apply a homogeneous model of quality standards. Rather than being a guide to analyze, promote and evaluate quality (making sure that institutions, external evaluators and CNA itself look into the same aspects and accept the same indicators), the model developed by CNA is a checklist of quality standards applied to the various programmes and institutions. In practice, the Council is aware of the difficulty involved in establishing detailed criteria in advance since, in each particular case, only the relevant academic community would be in a position to determine such criteria. There is no doubt that somewhat general quality indicators exist, such as the requirement of competent faculty, with the appropriate commitment and the highest possible academic level of qualification – in some fields, and in particular in certain disciplines that call for a high percentage of teachers with a Ph.D. and research-work background.
Box 8. Criteria for granting accreditation status

1. Only members of academic communities, with sufficient knowledge of the “paradigm” their discipline or profession entails, fulfil the requirements to expertly evaluate training in their particular fields of work.

2. In their evaluation, peers must explain the whole set of characteristics included in the model of the National Accreditation System. This set of characteristics is the referent to evaluate the quality of all programmes.

3. Bearing in mind the nature of the programme (universal determining factors), and their location within an institution and a framework (specific determining factors) the differentiated analysis of characteristics, turns an abstract or model of general optima into an ideal programme model, that allows an evaluation of the gap between the real programme and the optimum defined for this type of programme.

4. As far as this optimum is concerned, peers grade the programme pointing out strengths and weaknesses with regard to previously differential characteristics in accordance with their relative importance.

5. In order to perform its own evaluation, the National Council of Accreditation first takes into account the self-evaluation made by the institution, the external evaluation made by peers and the reaction of the institution to the peer evaluation. The weighting of characteristics and quality assessments made through self- and external evaluation should be duly substantiated in reports submitted by those concerned. In its final evaluation, the Accreditation Council critically analyzes arguments put forward and discusses all differences arising there from.

6. Proper peer selection ensures the objectivity and legitimacy of the process. However, the comparison of the institution’s self-
evaluation and the peers’ evaluation, aided by the careful analysis of arguments that legitimate such an evaluation, together with the examination of duly documented working conditions, allow for a more objective evaluation by the Council.

7. So far, none of the institutions whose programmes have not been granted Accreditation have objected the Council’s decisions. The Council’s decisions are made known to the institutions and include an analysis of strengths and weaknesses on the basis of which the decision is taken.

8. Quality evaluation is envisaged as a process that combines both qualitative and quantitative elements. What counts is not the definition made beforehand of a universal scale on which a specific point defines high quality grading, but a set of arguments based on actual data, the meaning of which depends on the synergy of the various factors involved.

In all areas concerned, it is undoubtedly of utmost importance to count on full-time faculty members that are at all times ready to meet student needs. However, the size and appropriate commitment of faculty depends not only on the areas themselves but, also on teaching methodology and on strategies and types of support used. No institution lacking an adequate library for in-depth research work in the different fields of education it offers and for the comprehensive education of students, can hope to access to high-quality recognition. In the meantime, the availability of computer resources in some areas could be essential to review the work made by the corresponding academic community.

The above does not mean in any way whatsoever that the analysis of standards is overlooked. Even though this is not its core task, it has been mentioned already that CNA has been working hand in hand
in some areas with academic communities involved in the definition of minimal criteria in the creation and operation of academic programmes. Such is the specific case of Health Sciences (an area in which work has been performed with school associations), and Education (area in which, as mentioned, CNA was entrusted with the task to implement Decree 272 of 1998, providing for minimal requirements to arrange and operate the area programmes). Generally speaking, academic peers appointed by the Council are supposedly aware of minimal conditions required. Some peers have been involved in the definition of such minima in their areas of work, as has been the case with working teams of ICFES, for the operation of academic programmes. However, as far as voluntary Accreditation of Excellence is concerned, peers do not only guarantee that minimal conditions are met, but rather that the programme actually achieves high quality indexes beyond these minima. Any area awarded Accreditation of Excellence has easily proven its ability to exceed the minima required for the creation and operation of programmes in its area of work. Despite the fact that a rather high number of programmes in the area of education have been certified as having complied with minimal requirements through the mechanism of “previous accreditation” (acreditación previa) the total number of education programmes that have obtained Accreditation of Excellence is rather low.

Counting on the co-operation of academic communities, CESU is in charge of defining minimal conditions for programme creation and operation. As already mentioned, ICFES, CESU’s technical secretarial, is currently working on the matter. However most progress has been made in socially important programmes. In other areas corresponding regulations are still to be set forth. For the time being, while a request is put forth that minimal quality conditions be met before programmes are allowed to operate, appropriate monitoring tools to be used in all cases are still missing.
CNA only appoints a peer when convinced that the person meets the necessary requirements of an academic community: Doctoral degrees, available records in research work, teaching and leadership experience in their academic field, together with widely acknowledged professional endeavours. Relevant communities, through recognized institutions and academic associations, must also have nominated them.

During the introductory process, the Council insists upon the importance of weighting the various quality characteristics – in accordance with criteria suitable to the requirements of education in the field – and to assess weighting and evaluation under consideration. In practical terms, evaluation becomes a mechanism to unmistakably explain to what degree there is compliance to the characteristics of the model, on the basis of which academic peers are able to come to the conclusion that high quality levels have been attained. Moreover, peers are requested to make an overall assessment of the programme that provides useful guidance to the final evaluation performed by CNA. To, again, become members of new working teams to evaluate quality of other programmes the Council invites peers whose criteria are particularly valuable on account of clarity and seriousness of their fundamental principles. Thus, a group of evaluators is put in place to contribute their expertise and discuss their own criteria with other newly appointed members of their academic communities that are working on quality evaluation for the first time.

Peers’ appraisal not only concerns what has been achieved, but must also takes into consideration the mechanisms for quality enhancement that have been effectively implemented. Once it is asserted that quality requirements have been met, it is possible to identify action that may help achieve a higher level of quality within the short-term. A precise time schedule for accreditation enforcement allows the Council to also identify different quality levels as they are achieved. It should be stressed
that the assessment of accreditation is the outcome of a synthesis of various inter-related aspects, and is not the estimation that an aggregate of requirements has been accomplished.

Bearing the above in mind, and despite certain constraints to grant accreditation to a specific programme, prevailing differences between various programmes that have been evaluated should be acknowledged; this should also be the case when differences are observed between high quality programmes within a same area.

It is not generally possible, however, to provide universal guidelines that take into account all of these variations, and CNA prefers not to propose quality standards. Rather than giving a rating as an indication of quality standards required for accreditation, CNA defines the difference between the optima to be attained (described in the model characteristics) and the achievements of the programme, mainly pinpointing its strengths and shortcomings. The above is a rather abridged procedure of the Council’s assessment. When accreditation is not granted, explicit mention is made of issues to be checked by the institution. If advisable, specific actions are suggested to solve the most pressing problems.
IV. EXPERIENCES, CONSTRAINTS, SOLUTIONS AND SCOPE OF THE NATIONAL ACCREDITATION SYSTEM

Self-evaluation at a public university

To illustrate how the methodology for accreditation is applied at the level of a particular higher education institution, the experience of one particular public university is presented on the basis of a survey made by a research group from the same institution, namely the Universidad de Antioquia. The study shows the experiences gained by the institution in the field of self-evaluation and stresses the importance of the participation of the academic community involved in the programme in this process to achieve reliable conclusions. Towards this end, the Universidad de Antioquia, one of the country's most prestigious and complex public universities, put in place mechanisms to overcome a series of difficulties, revealed by the accreditation process, related to management, faculty, student and graduate representatives.

The Universidad de Antioquia is a 200-year old higher education institution. It has an enrolment of 21,500 graduate students and 1,500 post-graduate students, 14 Departments, four Schools, four Institutes and 16 Research Centres. It provides 65 professional programmes, 93 post-graduate courses, 26 Master of Science degrees and sixs doctoral degrees. The University has ten research groups of excellence and 11 consolidated research groups. The National Accreditation System of Colombia has currently accredited 22 professional programmes for their high quality in the following

areas of study: Biology, Bacteriology and Clinical Laboratory, Medicine, Nursing, Nutrition and Dietetics, Pharmaceutical Chemistry, Sanitary and Environmental Engineering, Philosophy, Basic Education Bachelor's Degree, Physical Education Bachelor's Degree, Library Sciences, Public Accountancy, Veterinary Medicine, Engineering, Physics, Zoology, Law, Chemistry, Technical Chemistry, Anthropology, Economy and Social Work.

One of the initial steps undertaken for accreditation was to create a Central Committee for Self-evaluation and Accreditation and provide it with legitimacy required to perform its duties as guide and co-ordinator of the entire self-evaluation process and in particular to monitor the work of the Programme Committees. Also, it was necessary to establish the terms of reference of the Committees’ work so that it could be linked with the university’s formal structure. The vice-chancellor’s office for academic affairs was appointed as “technical secretary”, and entrusted with the responsibility to lead the development of tools to be used for self-evaluation purposes on the basis of CNA guidelines. An initial training session was attended by members of the committees, who could count on the ongoing support of the Central Committee for Self-evaluation and Accreditation, the vice-chancellor’s office and national and international experts, as needed.

The objective of the activity was to train members of the committees and to discuss their commitment to “hard, ongoing and participatory work”, within the framework of the analysis of the university’s mission and institutional project. Moreover, objectives and methods for programme evaluation, i.e. CNA guidelines, strategies for collection and analysis of information, preparation of a comprehensive preliminary report to be validated by people concerned with the programme and by peers, and the visit of peers in charge of external evaluation and of the final report were submitted and discussed.
The above exercise led to the analysis of particular features of the departments involved in self-evaluation. It also helped committee members to become aware of the fact that self-evaluation is a self-managed and participatory endeavour. That it cannot be carried out single-handedly, rather, by way of peer interaction and, therefore, that it requires basic consensus. Committees led the campaign to disseminate the process and create awareness amongst students, graduates, teachers, managerial staff and employees of academic divisions. The end product of this effort was that all divisions decided to willingly submit 14 graduate programmes to CNA accreditation. As self-evaluation of these programmes progressed, other academic programmes took the decision to apply to become part of the National Accreditation Programme. Additionally, and on the basis of the conclusions of self-evaluation, each programme designed an “Improvement Plan” intended to overcome shortcomings and to improve strengths as identified. The plan contains a short description of the situation to be addressed, strategies for action and financing of goals set forth.

As with all other institutions with accredited programmes on the basis of their high quality, the most interesting feature of the case at hand was the political decision made by the highest institutional bodies of the university (the Higher Council and the Academic Council) to abide by and commit themselves to excellence and to ongoing and participatory self-evaluation. Also, to state as their goal a vision and set high quality requirements and to be accountable to society. For example, the Higher Council of Universidad de Antioquia established the “Fund to Enhance Accredited Programmes”. The University asked its Planning Division to allocate resources to projects submitted by self-evaluated programmes that committed themselves to show how these resources are used. This methodology to channel financial resources to self-evaluated programmes has begun to create
a culture which encourages clear allocation of resources, academic follow-up of programme and university community participation around criteria of quality and belongingness.

Once the process of self-study was initiated, the Universidad de Antioquia began allocating resources both to self-evaluation of programmes submitted to accreditation, and to improve accredited programmes. Allocated resources amounted to US$341,818 during 1999. Notwithstanding financial difficulties Colombian public universities are currently going through, this meaningful figure shows the institution’s commitment to quality enhancement.

Provided a participatory environment and clear management structures are in place, the procedure adopted by Antioquia to improve quality showed that a great many people were required in a serious and congruent endeavour, with much responsibility and commitment. Significant relevance and efficiency levels that had not been previously attained have become feasible, allowing to overcoming the usual suspicion and skepticism prevailing amongst members of the university community whenever this type of processes are undertaken.

In order to substantiate self-evaluation of programmes submitted to CNA, together with other universities, Universidad de Antioquia has turned to “outside peers” who play the role of meta-evaluators of the self-evaluation phase, replicating in this way and in advance of the visit to be made by peer teams appointed by CNA. The outside peer is defined as an “equal academic” since, being a teacher, researcher or graduate from another institution, and guest of the programme undergoing the self-evaluation process, he/she is accepted as a member of the academic community. His/her work is basically innovative, while the outcome of his/her efforts allows the programme to improve processes and assess self-evaluation. In line
Experiences, constraints, solutions and scope of the National Accreditation System

with comments made by researchers involved in the survey mentioned, this system has allowed for major gains, i.e., the strengthening of academic autonomy and self-regulation, the promotion of an evaluation-driven culture, the awareness and acceptance of self-evaluation as the driving force to enhance quality. It also allows for the verification of strengths and shortcomings to be laid down in an agenda for collective commitment. Finally, it stimulates the ability for self-criticism, the willingness to accept change, behavioural transparency, trust and self-esteem and provides a true link between the programme and the academic and scientific community.

Nevertheless, researchers would pose a question: “What follows self-evaluation and accreditation?” In their opinion, the reply should be that it is the improvement of quality, increasing efficiency, the encouragement of a culture of ongoing evaluation and the accountability of institutional bodies with regard to University endeavours to accomplish its mission and objectives. The Universidad de Antioquia is doing just that.

The first programme of the Universidad de Antioquia to be accredited was the Social Work Programme in January 1999 that obtained accreditation for three years. This three-year period was devoted to the completion of its self-evaluation in view of procuring renewed accreditation (“re-accreditation”): recognizing increased efforts, collating numerous attempts to overcome its weaknesses and analyzing general innovations. Other accredited programmes progressed in their plans of improvement (revision of curricula plans to render them more relevant and of teaching capacity, strengthening of research, donation of libraries and laboratories, putting in place of innovative communication projects etc). The Universidad de Antioquia, is presently active in a self-evaluation of additional
programmes, as well as of the institution with the aim to obtain high quality, as well as programme accreditation. It is important to note that by August 2002 another six universities had manifested their desire, as had the Universidad de Antioquia, to apply for institutional accreditation. These institutions are currently striving towards an institutional self-evaluation. Considering the progress, CNA plans that several Colombian universities should obtain Accreditation of Excellence during the first semester of 2004.

This is extremely significant for the essential part of higher education quality in the country, and produces the complementary effect of the institutional accreditation process and the high quality programme. When combined with the action of minimum standards of evaluation on unaccredited programmes and evaluation of master’s and doctoral programmes, an interesting cycle of assurance of quality will be completed.
Experience gained throughout the last few years of implementation by the National System of Accreditation has prompted institutions to become aware of the model's feasibility. In accordance with the type of institution and the kind of academic programme, for instance, characteristics may be differentially interpreted. Furthermore, as previously pointed out, there is a possibility for the institution to replace or incorporate new variables and indicators beyond those suggested by the Council. While the model applied to some programmes was devoid of changes or additions up to the indicated level for self-evaluation purposes, such flexibility has not always been utilized. Although some people directly involved in the evaluation process question the model's accuracy, anyone can become aware of the fact that, once its flexibility is acknowledged during the self-evaluation process, it does not threaten institutional autonomy. Moreover, given the similarity of the model used for both self-evaluation and the external visit, there is continuity in both accreditation stages of the process.

Though the process advances on the basis of an examination of original conditions, self-evaluation is the first veritable stage of the accreditation process. Originally, due concern was given to the notion that peers and the Council alike could count on the report relating to the original as data on which to form an opinion. However, in the face of changes occurring between the Council's and peer visits, after approximately a year of self-evaluation, a decision was made to consider original conditions to be only a preliminary approach. Though useful to the institution, the outcome of such a visit should
not be included in data addressing the assessment in the final stages of the overall process.

However, if significant changes are brought about by the self-evaluation, it is necessary to make sure that their outcome is sustainable. The transient effects of accreditation enforcement can be worthwhile – efforts made by institutions towards quality improvement can be rather significant, but they should limit themselves to a short-lived impetus, aiming to obtain accreditation for a given programme.

Colombian higher education is rather heterogeneous, not only as far as teaching methods and types of courses are concerned, but also as regards quality. Some institutions have proceeded to a systematic self-examination through self-evaluation processes, their intention being to obtain proposals for qualitative improvement, so as to swiftly adapt their internal evaluation to the CNA accreditation model. In the meantime, during the process other institutions have become aware that the task is more strenuous than originally thought, and that it includes both the development and testing of instruments for information collection purposes.

Amongst other issues, “Guía de autoevaluación con fines de acreditación para programas de pregrado”, suggests “sources and instruments pertaining to the self-evaluation process” used and supplemented by institutions. Amongst sources suggested for collecting evidence related to each indicator, are the following informants:
Teachers
Students

Recommended instruments are:

Interviews
Workshops
Surveys

Governmental organizations
Other

Documentary information
Numerical information
Other types of information

As far as self-evaluation is concerned, the programme resorts to instruments such as those already mentioned and collects information which, once examined, is included in the programme report. This exercise must be performed for all 66 quality characteristics set forth in CNA model.

For example, a self-evaluation report showed (and illustrated by means of statistical figures) the following situation for Characteristic 16, referring to the faculty of an academic programme:

• high levels of academic training;
• high percentage of full-time teachers (137) and professorships (105);
• high volume of scientific papers published in national (1,665) and international journals (139);
• 50 publications: 33 texts and 17 books on research work;
• 233 university publications as support to teaching;
• 27 national prizes – one teacher in particular was awarded several international prizes;
• the most prestigious local professional people are attached to the programme as teachers;
• teachers have been given pedagogical and didactical training by the university;
• students are aware that a high percentage of their teachers are good professionals and educators, prepare adequate teaching material, comply with their duties and keep excellent interpersonal relationships.
The peer team involved in the visit and evaluation of the programme asserted the truthfulness of the information supplied on the characteristic in question, as well as that pertaining to the remaining 65 quality characteristics included in the self-evaluation report. Also, the External Evaluation Report prepared by the team members contained issues they deemed relevant.

As previously mentioned, any remarks made by the institution on the peer evaluation report help CNA in its Final Evaluation and enables the Council to critically view the external evaluation. In certain cases, CNA assessment of the external evaluation calls for peers to review their original report, in particular when the peer report hints at the decision the Council should make, as though the Final Evaluation was non-existent. The Final Evaluation made by the Council should be considered to be a sort of meta-evaluation that encompasses the institution’s reaction. However, even if any difficulty regarding peer evaluation, similar to the one just mentioned, should arise, the evaluators’ work can be appraised by no other group or individual than the Council itself.
VI. OVERCOMING OBSTACLES AND STRATEGIES RELATED TO THE VALIDATION OF THE MODEL

Even though Law 30, setting up the National Accreditation System in Colombia, was enacted in 1992, it was not until July 1995 that the National Council of Accreditation was established. The Council then set to work on the development of a model that synthesized the experiences of former CNA experts who had carried out sound research on the evaluation of quality in higher education. The model, however, was expected to follow CESU guidelines. Overall policies provided in these guidelines (briefly mentioned in this paper) were gathered together in CESU Agreement 06, issued in late 1995.

The first version of the model was published in 1996 and, undoubtedly, it gathered together features contained in various documents dealing with likely objectives. Each feature was discussed and modified insofar as it explained some quality-related issues and their relevance within the national scope. Discussions were instrumental for the model to reach consensus by all CNA members.

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the model was discussed by several academic communities and top managerial staff of higher education institutions in Colombia. During these meetings a detailed analysis was made of the philosophy, objectives, quality criteria and characteristics of the model. On occasions, the formulation of new characteristics was suggested. Before the model was implemented for the first time, and from the moment it was formulated, this working strategy allowed for its dissemination and critical examination by the academic community.
The National Accreditation System in Colombia: experiences from the National Council of Accreditation (CNA)

The Council’s work was at first to draw up and disseminate the model and to build up consensus around it within the academic community and in higher education institutions. CNA members called on institutions throughout the country and meetings were held with representatives from regional institutions to discuss the model. This was a great and enriching experience for all people concerned.

Visits to discuss original conditions played a significant role to help iron out differences and to restore teachers’ and students’ confidence in the model. Though this particular effort had not actually been thought out prior to this, it has greatly enhanced the process.

As institutions launched the self-evaluation process, efforts had to be focused on providing guidance and clarification to this accreditation stage. Feasible implementation methods were reviewed and guidelines were drawn up (see above). Another perceivable constraint was found to be the cost related to the accreditation process, especially in its self-evaluation stage. This stage entails the collection and systemization of a large volume of information and the solution of problems detected during its development. However, despite its significant cost, self-evaluation is instrumental to the identification of problems and the design of corrective measures.

Higher education institutions that have submitted their programmes to the accreditation process have supported the cost involved in self-evaluation and in the activities for improvement. On the basis of financial resources allocated by the National Budget, and whenever institutions file a request to this end, the Council funds certain specific self-evaluation activities. In particular, it covers expenses related to its own work and external programme evaluation. Financial resources allocated to this end have amounted to a yearly sum of US$600,000.
The state has funded thus far most of the work involved in the implementation of the Accreditation System. However, as the system expands its scope of action, it is likely that institutions themselves will have to contribute financial resources to cover external evaluation expenses. It has been suggested that these expenses should be partially covered by private institutions and that State higher education institutions should allocate an additional heading.

Institutions are earnestly committed to self-evaluation for accreditation purposes. Associations of university faculties, such as ASCOFAME (Colombian Association of Medical Education Faculties), AICOFI (Colombian Association of Engineering Education Faculties), AICOFAEN (Colombian Association of Nursing Education Faculties) and ASCOLFA (Colombian Association of Faculties of Administration), amongst others, combining Medicine, Engineering and Business Administration programmes are strongly committed to programme accreditation.

External evaluation, however, is not devoid of contradictions. Some peer reports have been questioned for reasons such as the following:

- Institutions express their disagreement with the superficial review performed by peers who, from their perspective, ignore or disregard features that an in-depth examination could identify and request that the qualitative assessment of the programme be modified in consequence.
- Certain institutions question the self-sufficiency of some peers and their scant disposition to dialogue.
- Some peers disagree with approaches that differ from their own epistemological interpretations, and appear to be inaccurate from the stance of academic exactness. Though this assessment has little
bearing on the external evaluation report, indeed, some academics and managerial staff resent the peer approach.

- Peer team members are sometimes unable to reach consensus and their differing points of view are stated in unrelated reports that lead to different conclusions. In such an occurrence, CNA must carefully look into the conflicting stances in order to issue a definite assessment in the Council final evaluation.

- Institutional criticism is not always justified, and the difficulty involved in setting up wholly universal criteria in peer selection could be used to justify weaknesses, and thus disapproving the individual who has made the assessment. However, this scenario has not materialized.

- While competence and integrity are criteria to appoint peers, it has been implemented that a peer who has been rightfully put into question should not be appointed a second time.

- Although less relevant, features such as meeting deadlines for report presentation or the quality of this report are starting to emerge as important issues regarding peer selection.

- As previously mentioned, the quality of peer work, assessed by both institutions and the Council, has allowed peers to be appointed more than one time. Hence, they have become experts in the evaluation process and are able to help new evaluators in the team.

- Whenever it does not comply with conditions set forth by CNA, peers are requested to review and submit their report a second time before delivering it to the institution concerned. This procedure is justified by the oversimplification of some evaluators.

At times, they only make an overall analysis of factors, devoid of appropriate analysis, and do not look into the whole body of quality characteristics. Also, on occasions, peers pinpoint the time the accreditation process will take, and are forced to change their report. The above sometimes happens in spite of detailed instructions given during the introductory session, conducted
with the aim to allow peers to clearly assess quality so as to enable the Council's final assessment. Moreover, it is not up to them to determine whether or not the programme should be accredited, neither should they set the date at which the accreditation should be in force.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, an introductory session is a core activity of peer training. While it does not add new skills to a highly specialized and consolidated professional or to the disciplinary competence of the peer, it does stress basic features of the external evaluation process peers must undertake. During the introductory session guidance is given as to the contents of documents to be drawn up by the Council, both as regards conceptualization and in relation to criteria set forth in the Guidelines. Also, patterns of attitudes and relationships involved in the work are discussed, as well as its guiding principles. Knowledge is not sufficient to become a good peer. Enough flexibility is also a must to be able to accept the legitimacy of educational projects even though they are different to those the evaluator is used to, because of different background or links with the academic community. It is also essential to be exact and objective when assessing the quality of a particular training.

Recently, a university association of the country's most prestigious public and private institutions proposed to join forces with the Council, to take advantage of former experiences in the self-evaluation process, with the perspective of organizing intensive training workshops for prospective academic peers. In October 2000, the first Workshop on External Evaluation was held at the Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellín. The two-day event was attended by 30 academics attached to several higher education institutions located in the western region of Colombia. It provided significant experiences. The seminar aimed to promote awareness of the Accreditation Model put forward by CNA, to examine the importance
of external academic evaluators’ work within the framework of accreditation processes and to develop methodological and technical skills in academic peers. This first-ever experience ‘in training potential external evaluators’ could be adapted to other parts of the country, and would serve to reinforce the peer bank established by CNA.

Once the peer has performed the first external evaluation, he/she becomes acquainted not only with the philosophy and structure of the model, but also with communication strategies and criteria to perform a significant and all-inclusive evaluation. As previously mentioned, this is the reason why experienced peers are chosen in priority. They are usually chosen to act as co-ordinators and heads of peer teams.

While academic education is the core criterion to choose peers, other features related to their academic background are also borne in mind, with the purpose of ensuring both peer competence and seriousness: leadership skills expressed in their ability to perform high responsibilities and relentless capacity to produce knowledge, as proven by mechanisms in force in their academic community.

CNA has pointedly stated at its meetings with academics and institutions that the legitimacy of the external evaluation process is based on recognition of peers rather than on the exact definition of standards that could not be implemented in a universe where such a diversity of institutional proposals exists.

Other obstacles experienced stem from the fact that the accreditation process leads to differentiation of institutions. Though CNA has pointedly announced that the focus of the system during the dissemination phase is not on rating institutions, in practice differences arise between accredited and non-accredited
Overcoming obstacles and strategies related to the validation of the model

programmes and between programmes that had been accredited for different durations. Once academic, administrative and economic incentives are put in place, as set forth by the Higher Education Law, such incongruities will become more significant (see Table 5).

Moreover, CNA has stressed the fact that the period for which accreditation is granted (between three to ten years) does not depend on quality achieved only at a given time, but also both on programme features and change processes to which the institutions are committed. In practice, the period for which accreditation is granted is considered as a criterion for the quality of programmes.

Some sectors of the student body are, indeed, annoyed by the supposition that accreditation may become a propaganda tool for institutions with a view to increasing their financial resources linked to the potential increase of admission rates.

When some public institutions have been called on to assess Original Conditions and during the self-evaluation period, great efforts have been put forth to convince some student groups who have wrongly linked accreditation to political or economic models. Their attitude has led them to reject the model on grounds of this characterization.

The supposition that accreditation is instrumental in the increase of higher admission rates and in its privatization is convergent to the staunch support awarded to the process by the public university sector. Although its internal regulations demand accreditation of offered programmes, only one of the most important public universities in the country has preferred to keep out of the accreditation process. However, it has now set its self-evaluation process in motion. So far, and despite the fact that state higher education institutions account for barely 30 per cent of the country’s
enrolment in the sector, 48 per cent of university programmes from public institutions have been accredited.

Currently, and after five years of work by CNA, 138 programmes have been awarded Accreditation of Excellence. Close to four hundred programmes have been or are undergoing the accreditation process (see Table 6).

Table 6. Programmes currently undergoing or having completed accreditation process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Evaluation</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Evaluation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Evaluation</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accredited</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non accredited</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>377</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Consejo Nacional de Acreditación.

Though unsuccessful, some proposals have been made to decentralize the National Accreditation System. In practice, the six regions of the national territory already have programmes accredited on the basis of their high quality (see Table 6 and Figure 2).
Members of the CNA come from different regions in the country and the model acknowledges different institutional missions and projects.

When a comparison is made between the number of accredited programmes and the number of programmes in place in the country, the impact of the National Accreditation System on the overall quality does not seem so significant. The opposite is true. Out of the 313 higher education institutions currently operating in the country, 80 have started their self-evaluation process towards accreditation of some programmes. As pointed out by institutions engaged in the process, these self-evaluation processes have led to meaningful changes in the overall quality of programmes.

The claim could be made that original opposition to the process has been overcome, that a culture for systematic evaluation – previously absent from higher education in Colombia – has widened its scope and can presently be acknowledged as the process’s greatest gain.
Experience gained through programme accreditation clearly shows how they have been useful in quality enhancement, not only of programmes but, also, of higher education institutions themselves. It is expected that the launching of the Institutional Accreditation System will contribute to the promotion of and strengthening of quality at higher education institutions in Colombia. Moreover, it is envisaged that it will become a tool for the State to publicly acknowledge the fact that accredited institutions are endowed with high quality levels.

- It becomes the avenue for higher education institutions to be accountable to society and to the State as far as the public service they provide is concerned.
- It signals quality paradigms to higher education institutions.
- It brings to light the competencies and characteristics of institutions in the face of the needs and requirements of social and economic sectors in the country.
- It supplies reliable information to users of higher education, so as to enable them to make quality-based decisions.
- It encourages academic mobility and co-operation between higher education institutions on the grounds of quality.
- It positively promotes the responsible practice of university autonomy.

Unlike accreditation of programmes that focuses on the evaluation of disciplinary and professional paradigms, institutional accreditation is centered on the evaluation of the institution as a whole, while specifically studying the transparency of the institutional mission and project, the social relevance of the latter, the accomplishments of the institution, as well as its ability to manage and organize itself to achieve the social objectives inherent in higher education and the particular goals which, in accordance with its own nature, are sought by the institution. Furthermore, institutional accreditation examines
the skill of an institution to self-evaluate and self-regulate its different areas of study, resources and activities (see Box 9).

**Box 9. Relationship between institutional accreditation and accreditation of academic programmes**

Institutional accreditation and accreditation of academic programmes complement each other. Their complementarity lies in the fact that institutional accreditation is oriented towards the institution as a whole, while that referring to programmes looks into them as comprehensive parts of institutions. The institution as a whole is much more than the total sum of its parts, or programmes – its basic components. Therefore, accreditation of programmes should reinforce the institutional accreditation and, at the same time, the latter should encourage accreditation of programmes.

Whereas accreditation of programmes neither seeks nor succeeds in making an all-embracing examination of the quality of the institution, institutional accreditation does not entail a strictly accurate and overall analysis of its academic programmes. Institutional accreditation would probably not be feasible where deficient programmes are offered. In practice, though, it may be possible for some high quality institutions to show a degree of heterogeneity at their programme development level.

Insofar as the evaluation culture is strengthened, situations like those we referred to above become more unlikely. In many countries, however, and because it addresses different demands and stakeholders, accreditation of programmes is simultaneous to institutional accreditation. What makes both accreditation types...
important is their complementary nature and the need to develop multiple strategies to achieve maximum quality.

Hence, incentives being defined for institutional accreditation are quite different from those being offered to accreditation of programmes. The former is not a substitute for the latter. Rather, and bearing in mind similarities between the two accreditation types and, further, as well as the fact that a meaningful part of the information collected fulfils the requirements of both accreditations, despite the fact that it cannot replace this accreditation since it responds to different arguments and points of view, institutional accreditation relies to a great extent upon the experience and the work carried out so far by higher education institutions in their endeavour to accredit their programmes. The institutional accreditation would stem from the lengthening and broadening of a demanding and valuable endeavour being carried out with great expertise, responsibility and transparency with regard to accreditation of graduate programmes.


Recently, the National Council of Higher Education (CESU) issued an agreement to grant academic and economic incentives to accredited programmes. Also, Decree 1655 of 1999, created the Award to Higher Education and Public Faith “Luis López de Mesa” to ‘commend and praise’ academic programmes that, through a voluntary evaluation process, contribute to the improvement of Colombian education quality. Likewise, Law 633 of 2000 set forth tax exemptions to natural and legal persons who donate money to professional education programmes offered by fully accredited
higher education institutions, or by institutions awarded accreditation to one or more programmes. Furthermore, social recognition and quality enhancement have played a significant role in the construction and original implementation of the National Accreditation System.
VII. LESSONS LEARNED
AND IMPACT OF ACCREDITATION

The Colombian quality assurance mechanisms relate to different levels and activities in higher education: institutions, undergraduate and graduate programmes. It performs at the same time various functions; ensuring the starting conditions, compliance with minimum standards and guarantee of high quality (the accreditation process). It seems that Colombia has managed to establish a multi-functional system of quality assurance for a diverse higher education system. While it is essential that all institutions and programmes adhere to minimum standards, it is also important to acknowledge more advanced levels of quality. This creates acknowledged role models and incentives for other institutions to strive for higher levels of quality.

Even if quality assurance mechanisms cover different functions, they are however not totally distinct. Indeed, there is a certain continuum in having mechanisms in place that ensure that requests for an opening of new programmes and/or institutions that correspond to minimum requirements for a pre-established period, or for at least the time during which such initiatives should be consolidated. In addition, all programmes, both undergraduate and graduate, should comply with minimum standards. Mechanisms for quality improvement must also be in place. Therefore, it is important that co-ordination of these different functions that acknowledge links be established. In Colombia all of these functions are performed, often by different organizations whose activities lack synchronization.

Furthermore, Accreditation of Excellence is demanding in terms of expected quality levels and process. At present, it will be difficult
for some institutions to become involved in this type of accreditation and thus strive for high quality. Despite this fact, as could be expected, higher education institutions that were committed to the process greatly benefited from the accreditation process. Objectives sought after are being achieved. In particular, and as in the case of Universidad de Antioquia, the institutional qualitative improvement process is now in place, and has been achieved as a whole along the self-evaluation process. In most cases, identifying and bringing shortcomings to light has led to improvement. The aim is to perform an in-depth quality evaluation so as to achieve accreditation of a programme. However, the institution itself is becoming subject to self-evaluation and, is generally liable to improvement through this process.

The open debate on institutional mission and project and the co-operative self-evaluation perceivably strengthen the identity of the university community and boosts its feeling of belongingness. They also improve the institutional environment and add sense to all staff contributions to the common project.

Idealistic estimations setting a six-month period of time for the internal evaluation process proved off the mark. As mentioned, this accreditation stage has, at times, lasted for more than a year. The timeframe for the self-evaluation stage depends on a series of factors:

- To what degree has the process advanced once officially initiated?
- To what degree is the information that is available to the institution both thorough and systematic in relation to its own processes, resources, interactions and actions?
- To what degree are the rules of the institutional game defined, and how explicit and strictly applied are regulations guiding institutional actions?
• What is the actual competence of teachers, students, graduates and managerial staff engaged in the process?
• How efficient is the development of consensus around the process and what is the degree of commitment of the people responsible for its implementation?
• What resources are available to develop and implement tools for the collection of information and to carry out actions leading to the solution of problems experienced (see Box 10).

On the other hand, even though they only become duly apparent as the process evolves, the moral virtues and communication skills of peers are as meaningful as their academic competence. Either CNA has been fortunate in the selection process or ethical and academic culture go hand in hand. It would be worthwhile, however, to focus on these values when a request is made to the academic community to suggest candidates as peers.

**Box 10. Lessons learned**

1. The debate in which academic communities and representatives from institutions have engaged themselves to analyze the programme accreditation model improved the model and widened consensus on accreditation.
2. Attendance by Council members at seminars convened by institutions and by the Council itself on accreditation and self-evaluation, has been central to lead processes and to disseminate the model and promote accreditation.
3. Any possibility to interact with professional people and scientists at different events on research, training and higher education-related subjects should be taken advantage of to ensure support and co-operation from academic communities.
4. Peers are tantamount to the legitimacy of the process. Their appointment should be carefully dealt with on the basis of an
external evaluators' database. This database should be constantly updated with the support of the academic community.

5. Even though external evaluations and, specifically, visits to institutions, are the space for a suitable exchange of experiences between peers, it would also be advisable to convene meetings or seminars at which experienced peers may impart their know-how to peers-to-be.

6. It would be advisable to make a space available for the exchange of ideas on experiences with institutional accreditation.

7. In order to ensure the legitimacy of the process and to make a thorough decision as regards accreditation, it is of paramount importance that institutions have the opportunity to state their opinion on external evaluation. The institutional reaction to this external report not only contributes new elements to the decision, but also allows evaluation of the work performed by external evaluators.

8. Transparency at all times of the process is essential to ensuring trust on the part of institutions. The inclusion of this criterion in the institutional self-evaluation ensures participation, as required, by the academic community and allows perceiving discrepancies and settling differences in time. In particular, an effort should be made to clearly define the process principles and guidelines beforehand.

9. Adequate mechanisms should be developed to bring to light any meaningful outcomes that the process may have and to adequately disseminate information.

10. The above does not dispute in any way the relevant policy to a negative decision of confidentiality. This policy prevents the accreditation process from becoming an instrument to harm those institutions that, even though adequately qualified, are unable to reach high quality levels called for by accreditation.
The original model combined institutional characteristics with those related to programmes. Even though this was necessary, and as the quality of a programme depends on contextual conditions, it delayed self-evaluation of the 66 characteristics, together with their variables and factors. Therefore, a decision was made to exclude the requirement to examine the institutional characteristics and to focus on programmes. A more restricted model consisting of 48 quality characteristics was thus developed to allow for easier implementation. In all respects, institutional accreditation will suitably add to programme accreditation.

In the long-term, the greatest gain is, perhaps, the emergence and consolidation of a culture of evaluation in Colombian higher education. The awareness that such an evaluation is not a mechanism to be depleted through external awards or punishments, but should be a critical outlook that, because of its own nature, and in all respects is the domain of the academy. This critical standpoint not only substantiates that evaluation is needed among academics but it also has an impact on the awareness of pedagogical processes and the overall dynamics of academic work (see Box 11).

**Box 11. Outlook of accreditation in Colombia**

1. Accreditation makes an ongoing contribution to the dissemination and institutional appropriation of an **evaluation culture** that brings to light and makes a comparison between conditions according to which higher education is provided, and promotes its qualitative enhancement.
2. Institutional accreditation shall widen the coverage of accreditation by encouraging an overall evaluation and greater commitment to relevance of study plans, qualification of faculty and research work.
3. It would be advisable to make inroads into international debates which allow countries to learn from each other. Furthermore, these debates should result in policies to accept and validate titles obtained in other countries on the basis of existing national accreditation programmes.

4. The process to define recently implemented incentives should continue to define the way in which accreditation should be acknowledged by processes that intend to allocate resources to research, low-income students assistance and teacher training.

2. Institutional efforts to address weaknesses as pointed out through the accreditation process and to ensure its renewal (once it has been granted for a given period of time), for its attainment (after a failed attempt), should contribute to the qualitative improvement of institutions.

6. Experience gained through external evaluation improves qualifications of peers and allows external peer teams to learn from each other. However, the system does not intend to work with professionals of evaluation.

7. In as much as there is dialogue between those responsible for self-evaluation of already accredited programmes and those responsible for self-evaluation of new programmes entering into the process, the exchange of instruments and expertise avoids renewal of mistakes and at the same time enhances work quality since it reduces time spent in self-evaluation and facilitates identification of weaknesses and strengths.

At times, the knowledge gained through peer relationships favours some institutional academic communities to consider work options, problems and even research fields or academic support they had not previously contemplated. The peers’ opinion also improves the
institution's awareness of feasible orientations and academic work dynamics; they broaden their viewpoints on education in their fields of work as well as on institutions in charge of supplying that education. Simultaneously, CNA members gain an overall vision of higher education allowing them to make increasingly objective assessments and committing them ethically to the overall description of education sector policies.

Notwithstanding the fact that an explicit code of ethics ruling, in particular, conflicts of interest of CNA members was originally non-existent, the Council spelled out some basic principles in this respect. One that should be mentioned is that members cannot be part of CNA decisions having a bearing on institutions to which Council members may be attached. Furthermore, they should restrain themselves from engaging any advisory work related to self-evaluation and accreditation processes. On the other hand, a decision was taken that several institutions located in the region should attend meetings to discuss the accreditation model its different model, in order to eliminate any comparative advantages resulting from a differentiated access to information.

The procedure to appoint CNA members should be devoid of influences, political or of any kind whatsoever having a bearing on a decision that should be academic in all respects. The appointment of new members on a two and-a-half year basis entails an adequate arrangement to ensure policy continuity. Nevertheless, it would be advisable to devise a way of taking advantage of the experience gained by people who have gone through the required intensive learning process of a councillor.
## APPENDICES

### 1. Period for which programmes are accredited

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<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Total accredited</th>
<th>Period (in years)</th>
<th>Recommended programmes</th>
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The National Accreditation System in Colombia: experiences from the National Council of Accreditation (CNA)

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<td>Period (in years)</td>
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2. Quality characteristics for Accreditation of Excellence of programmes

Factor: Institutional project

Characteristic 1

The institution has a clearly-formulated mission. This corresponds to the institutional definition, and is of public dominion. This mission is expressed in objectives, academic and administrative processes and targets for each programme. Likewise, it contains the institutional commitment to quality and to the principles and objectives established by law for higher education.

Characteristic 2

The institution has a clear definition of its purposes, goals and objectives. Achievements must be subjected to some type of evaluation. The result must be used to introduce improvements.

Characteristic 3

According to the above characteristics, the educational project guides the management and administration of programmes and serves as a fundamental reference in decision-making processes relating to contents, organization and activities of study, research, services to the community and institutional well-being plans.

Characteristic 4

The institution defines, maintains and evaluates its interaction with the external environment.
Characteristic 5

The educational project expresses the institution’s concern for permanently building and strengthening an academic community in an environment of well-being.

Characteristic 6

The educational project involves strategies aimed at promoting integral training of the academic community.

Characteristic 7

The educational project defines the characteristics of each of the substantive functions of the institution, the way the functions are articulated amongst each other, their own objectives and how these characteristics express the institution’s nature.

Characteristic 8

The educational project expresses the criteria to handle both physical and financial resources, as stated in the policies proposed for the respective programmes.

Characteristic 9

The institution performs follow-up of its policy, the results of which are used to introduce improvements and new orientations in the programmes and the institution as a whole.

Characteristic 10

The institutional project presents the institution’s organization, structure, explicit administration and activities, according to the
institution’s nature, size and complexity. These aspects are to ensure that the objectives proposed by the academic programs are reached.

**Characteristic 11**

The institutional project expresses a clear institutional policy of institutional well-being aimed at the creation and consolidation of an academic community, the integral training of all of its members and the establishment of an institutional climate propitiating academic development.

**Factor: Students and professors**

**Characteristic 12**

Addressing the specific elements and demands of each programme, the institution applies universal and impartial admission mechanisms, known to applicants.

**Characteristic 13**

The number of students admitted to the programme is compatible with the institution’s and programme’s capacities in order to guarantee admitted students the objective conditions required to continue and complete their studies.

**Characteristic 14**

The programme has defined the maximum number of drop-outs and the average time for students to complete their studies, reconcilable with the imposed quality and with requested efficiency and efficacy.

**Characteristic 15**

The institution possesses a regulated mechanism of professorial selection based on academic criteria and congruent with the program’s objectives.
Characteristic 16

The institution has professor and student statutes or regulations that define the obligations and rights, the disciplinary system and the system of participation of these in the institution’s directive bodies.

Characteristic 17

According to the institutional objectives and those specified in the programme, this programme has the number of dedicated professors with the required training levels.

Characteristic 18

Institutionalized and adequate systems for the evaluation of professors exist. The evaluations consider their academic performance and production as educators and researchers.

Characteristic 19

The institution has a system of academic hierarchy for its professors that contemplates widely known mechanisms of location and duration in academic categories and of promotion from one category to another.

Characteristic 20

The professor association, made according to the current standards, adapts to the needs and objectives of the programme.

Characteristic 21

The teaching posts serving the programme are adapted to its needs and objectives.
Characteristic 22

The programme has a centre of research with a level corresponding to the needs and objectives of the programme.

Characteristic 23

The programme’s professorate dedicates a significant amount of time to research work according to institution and programme type.

Characteristic 24

According to the pedagogic strategies employed, professors dedicate sufficient time to student services, in convenient and explicitly defined hours.

Characteristic 25

Professorial development policies suitable to the needs and objectives of the institution exist, in accordance with the objectives of the institution and of the programme.

Characteristic 26

Professors maintain interaction with both national and international academic communities. This interaction adapts to the needs and objectives of the programme.

Characteristic 27

Professorial remuneration is according to their professional and academic merits.
The National Accreditation System in Colombia: experiences from the National Council of Accreditation (CNA)

Factor: Academic processes

Characteristic 28

The study plan ensures training in knowledge, methods and basic principles of action of the respective discipline, profession, occupation or trade and is coherent with the institutional and programme objectives and corresponding work field.

Characteristic 29

The study plan is sufficiently flexible to incorporate new pedagogic contents and strategies and to allow integral training of students.

Characteristic 30

The methodologies employed in each teaching activity are coherent with the number of students and with the needs and objectives of the programme.

Characteristic 31

The bibliography used in the programme is sufficient and updated.

Characteristic 32

Through the programme and its methodologies, the interdisciplinary content becomes explicit and there is staff interaction with professionals of other disciplinary areas.

Characteristic 33

The programme possesses clear, universal and fair standards of student evaluation.
Characteristic 34

Students participate in programme evaluation and the use made of these evaluations is defined.

Characteristic 35

Clear mechanisms for the participation of the academic community in the orientation of the programme exist.

Characteristic 36

Professors at the institution participate in research projects pertaining to the scope and objectives of the programme.

Characteristic 37

The programme utilizes research performed both inside and outside of the institution to enrich and update the curricular content.

Characteristic 38

For programme development, the institution ensures association among the different research centres and between these and other centres performing relevant research.

Characteristic 39

The professors teaching in the programme produce materials for the development of the diverse education activities. Mechanisms of dissemination of these materials are available.

Characteristic 40

The programme has sufficient, accessible, adequate and updated bibliographic resources, according to its nature.
Characteristic 41

Computer resources and access to information services are both sufficient and adequate according to the nature of the programme.

Characteristic 42

The programme takes place where facilities include adequate workshops, laboratories, equipment, files and audiovisual means, practice fields and sufficient and adequate means of transport.

Factor: Institutional well-being

Characteristic 43

The institution has established policies of institutional well-being and offers opportunities and means for its community to develop individual and group skills.

Characteristic 44

Policies are in place for the support and acknowledgment of qualified teaching.

Characteristic 45

Services for institutional well-being are sufficient and adequate.

Characteristic 46

The well-being of students not only includes services but also generates training activities, and services relating to the support of human development.

Characteristic 47

Well-being services are addressed by sufficient personnel, properly skilled for this task.
Factor: Organization, administration and management

Characteristic 48

A division of responsibilities has been defined to develop the programme. The individuals responsible for the different functions possess the required training and are articulated amongst each other in such a way as to address properly both needs and objectives of the programme.

Characteristic 49

An organizational structure exists for the functions necessary to implement the programme and responsibilities are clearly and distinctly defined and known to users.

Characteristic 50

Administrative staff activities are in harmony with the institutional mission and correspond in number and training to the needs of the programme.

Characteristic 52

The programme includes effective, active and clearly established communication mechanisms and information systems.

Characteristic 53

The programme includes mechanisms aimed at encouraging and motivating the individuals forming part of it at the different organization levels.

Characteristic 54

There is orientation and leadership in the management of the programme. Clearly defined rules exist for the management of the programme and are known by users.
Factor: Graduates and their impact on the environment

Characteristic 55

Through the programme, the institution exerts a clearly positive influence on its environment, given its defined policies and corresponding to its nature and specific situation. This influence is the object of systematic study.

Characteristic 56

The programme has defined mechanisms to address problems of its environment through academic activities.

Characteristic 57

According to the specificity of the programme, the study plan incorporates the analysis of the problems of the environment.

Characteristic 58

The institution ensures a follow-up of the whereabouts and activities developed by graduates and confronts these activities with the institutional and social objectives and type of training it provides.

Characteristic 59

The graduates of the programme are known for the quality of their training and demonstrate an outstanding performance in their corresponding discipline, profession, occupation.

Factor: Physical and financial resources

Characteristic 60

The programme has adequate and sufficient physical resources for developing its substantive and support functions.
Characteristic 61

The use made of the physical plant is adequate; the support staff is sufficient for the needs of the programme and is adequately competent for exercising its functions.

Characteristic 62

The institution clearly establishes its policies, orientations and processes for developing its budget, and applies the policies consistently.

Characteristic 63

The institution can demonstrate total compliance with the financial requirements stated in the mission, the educational project and the academic activities.

Characteristic 64

The institution proves viability, stability, equity and integrity in the handling of its resources.

Characteristic 65

The institution has qualified managers to permit adequate administration of its financial resources.

Characteristic 66

The institution has budget allocation criteria and mechanisms for the programme and coherency between programme objectives and investment decisions.

3. Description of the external evaluation process


DESCRIPTION OF THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION PROCESS
ACADEMIC PEER TEAM VISIT TO PERFORM
EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF PROGRAMMES

Activities prior to peer visit

Appointment of academic peer team

The National Council of Accreditation is responsible for the appointment of academic peers. To this end, the Council shall act in accordance with criteria set forth in these Guidelines.

Once academic peers have been appointed, the National Accreditation System shall promptly inform the institution concerned that the academic peers’ team has been appointed to perform the External Evaluation. Furthermore, the Council shall advise the name of the team co-ordinator.

Training process

To act as member of the academic peers team, all members-to-be must attend a training process led by the National Council of Accreditation. The Council shall timely convene academic peers to this end and shall provide for the means to ensure their attendance.

Appointment of the academic peers’ team co-ordinator

The National Council of Accreditation shall appoint a co-ordinator for each academic peers’ team. The co-ordinator shall perform the following duties:
a) ensure that the External Evaluation process evolves in accordance with criteria set forth by the National Council of Accreditation;
b) ensure that each peer has timely access to the necessary documentation and has become acquainted with this information before the visit is made;
c) co-ordinate meetings of the academic peers’ team;
d) act as interlocutor between the National Council of Accreditation and the academic peers’ team;
e) agree with the institution concerned on the visit date and agenda, which should have been discussed previously with the academic peers’ team;
f) ensure the proper execution of tasks assigned to team members;
g) in agreement with the academic peers’ team, prepare a written External Evaluation report for submission to the National Council of Accreditation.

Visit

Objectives

The visit of the academic peers’ team aims to comply with the following objectives:

h) verify objectivity and truthfulness\textsuperscript{11} of self-evaluation.
a) complement the self-evaluation bearing in mind any issue the institution may have overlooked and that the academic peers’ team deems as meaningful to the analysis of the programme concerned.
b) make a detailed examination of critical issues brought to light by the previous study of documentation submitted.

\textsuperscript{11} Any untruth in the self-evaluation report that may be detected during the visit shall entail the immediate suspension of the External Evaluation Process.
The National Accreditation System in Colombia: experiences from the National Council of Accreditation (CNA)

Overall plan

The visit usually lasts for a three days. A suggestion is made for it to be from Sunday to midday Wednesday.

A thorough inspection shall be made of the academic programme components and the institution as deemed relevant to the evaluation of the programme concerned. This inspection shall include interviews, visits to facilities and review of materials and documents.

Once the visit is concluded, academic peers shall meet with the managerial staff of the institution and the programme under evaluation and shall offer an overall view of any critical aspects found.

Suggested programme for visit

Day 0

- The academic peers’ team travels to the city where the institution is headquartered.
- Team members meet at their hotel or at a previously arranged place. A minimum agenda for this meeting could be as follows:
  - Discussion of the agenda and clarification of issues.
  - Revision of most relevant documentation issues. Each academic peer shall offer his/her opinion. The co-ordinator shall make a summary of remarks made by the team members.
  - Selection of issues of interest to be discussed with the various academic and administrative agencies involved with the academic programme to be evaluated.
  - Task assignment.
- Meeting of the co-ordinator with the Dean or the person responsible for the academic programme to be evaluated in order to discuss the purpose and scope of the visit, to revise the agenda and to agree on details to be examined.
Day 1

1. Introduction of academic peers’ team to the Chancellor and all other staff of the institution.

2. Meeting of the academic peers’ team with the Dean or the person responsible for the academic programme. The subject of the meeting shall revolve around issues of interest agreed upon during the preliminary meeting.

3. Revision of additional documentation relevant to the academic programme to be evaluated. All documents such as brochures, curriculum, study plans, guides, bibliography, didactic material, typical evaluations, homework, essays and laboratory reports, as well as faculty, academic production samples, graduate theses and any other materials as may be deemed relevant shall be put at the disposal of the peer team by those responsible for the programme.

4. Revision of additional material related to institution management and administration, such as budgets, by-laws, regulations, organizational charts, development plans and any other materials as may be deemed relevant.

5. Interviews of the academic peers’ team members with teachers of different subjects or with people responsible for specific fields of interest of the academic programme under evaluation. Teachers shall be asked about the progress of the programme and its quality.

6. Interviews of the academic peers team members with students attending the programme. Students shall be asked about the programme workings and quality.

7. Interviews with members of the managerial staff of the academic programme and the institution.

8. Interviews with graduates from the academic programme.

9. Working meeting of team members. Academic peers shall submit partial reports related to the compliance of tasks assigned to each person. The co-ordinator shall make a summary of the day’s work.
Day 2

- Academic peer team members interview people responsible for, and visit the institution’s facilities: libraries, administrative offices, auditoria, supporting units, informatics centres and welfare facilities.

- Visit of academic peer team members to facilities of the academic programme and interviews with people responsible for them: classrooms, laboratories, working fields, workshops and offices.

- Working meeting of academic peer team members to discuss their findings on visits made. The co-ordinator shall make a summary of the day’s work.

Day 3

- Meeting of the academic peers’ team. The co-ordinator shall submit a draft report of the conclusions for the consideration of all the other academic peers.

- Final meeting of academic peer team members with the Chancellor, Vice-Chancellors and people responsible for the programme. A written report shall be made of critical aspects as identified.

Activities to be implemented after the visit

Preparation of the External Evaluation Report

Subject to previous consultation with all academic peers taking part in the process, the co-ordinator shall prepare the External Evaluation Report for personal submission to the National Council of Accreditation not later than thirty days after the visit. It shall be an all-inclusive report, the contents of which shall include:
a) Overall remarks on the institution and the academic programme under evaluation.

b) An analysis of quality characteristics as defined in the National Council of Accreditation model. In particular, the analysis shall take into account those characteristics deemed relevant to the academic programme under evaluation and make a comprehensive assessment of all factors set forth by the model.

c) A critical analysis of the self-evaluation performed by the institution.

d) An explicit and accurate evaluation of the quality of the academic programme.

e) Relevant recommendations.

Analysis of the External Evaluation Report

The National Council of Accreditation shall make an in-depth analysis of the External Evaluation Report. If necessary, the Council shall either discuss the report with the academic peers involved in the process or request clarifications as deemed relevant.

Remittance of the External Evaluation Report to the institution

The National Council of Accreditation shall send a copy of the External Evaluation Report to the institution not later than fifteen days after the date on which the report was submitted to the Council by the co-ordinator of the academic peers’ team. In case it is necessary to clarify the contents of the report, this deadline shall be modified and a new date shall be agreed upon with the institution.
Remarks by the institution about the External Evaluation Report

The institution shall submit its remarks or reactions to the External Evaluation Report to the National Council of Accreditation. The institution shall do so within a fifteen-day period following the date on which the report was received.
REFERENCES


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