

---- English Translation ----

Accreditation Processes in Mexico: Origins and Relevant Changes

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Abstract: The author discusses the origins and relevant changes that have occurred in Mexican higher education, regarding institutional and academic programs assessment and evaluation.

Keywords: Higher education, accreditation, academic programs, Mexico

Introduction

In Mexico, just as in other countries in the world, the changes in the higher education system arise in the postwar period, which is characterized by the growth in enrollment and by its complexity. This complexity manifests itself through the diversity of institutions of higher education: autonomous public institutions, state institutions, technological ones, polytechnic ones, technological institutes and private universities. The diversity is manifested among the institutions and within them—among departments and faculties.

However, scholars of higher education agree that its historical development in the last decades has been characterized by assuming a pattern of public policies that converge with others that have been developed in other countries, and in which the transverse axis has been, fundamentally, a sense of accountability, materialized in through Quality Assurance (QA), and whose main edge is the evaluation of different actors and processes (Meyer & Schofer, 2005).

In Mexico, in the last two decades, the government has led the effort to reverse the low quality of higher university education, which was prompted by its unregulated expansion between 1970 and 1980. The problem with quality has been associated, among other factors, with the bureaucratization of the institutions, neglect at the academic level of its programs, an inadequate enrollment distribution, the poor preparation of students, the insufficient preparation of the teaching staff and the weak relationship it maintains with the economy and society.

The repercussions identified with a low level of educational quality translate into difficulties for graduates when it comes to inserting themselves into the job market, the obsolescence of the teaching-learning methods, the lack of initiatives to update plans and programs of study, to problems relating to the weak, slow and delayed incorporation of new technologies into teaching and the academic production (Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo, 2011).

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The First Proposals for Evaluating Higher Education

Faced with this situation, the first actions undertaken in Mexico with regard to evaluating higher education date from the 1970s, and result from government programs and various initiatives from the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Learning (ANUIES). This organization proposed the creation of a National Examination Center.

In 1979, as part of the first national policies geared toward the improvement of the quality of higher education functions, the National System for Higher Education Permanent Planning (SINAPPES) was created. This system established four levels of action and their corresponding agencies: a) national, with the National Coordination for Higher Education Planning (CONPES); b) regional, with the Regional Council for Higher Education Planning (CORPES); c) state, with the State Commission for Higher Education the Planning (COEPES) and d) institutional, with the Institutional Planning Unit (UIP).

However, evaluation as a policy was institutionalized with the *Program for Educational Modernization* (1989-1994) during the administration of President Carlos de Salinas de Gortari, who prioritized the permanent, internal and external institutional evaluation, to promote the improvement of the quality of the educational programs and services offered, and as a goal, the creation of an agency that could develop and articulate a national process of higher education evaluation (Rubio Oca, 2006).

Within this framework and through a process of negotiation between the federal government agencies and the higher education institutions incorporated in the ANUIES, the National Evaluation Commission (CONAEVA) was designed in order to formulate and develop the national strategy for the creation and operation of the *National Evaluation System* based on three fronts: a) the self-evaluation of the institutions, b) the evaluation of the system and the subsystems conducted by specialists and agencies and c) the inter-institutional evaluation of academic programs and institutional functions through an evaluation mechanism made up of qualified peers from the academic community.

Taking as a reference the work of the CONAEVA, the public institutions carried out their first self-evaluation process between 1990 and 1991. The results were then submitted to the Department of Public Education (SEP), which led to improvement programs in areas such as library services, infrastructure and academic support. In addition, a global evaluation of the university and technological system was carried out by groups of experts, whose results were put toward the implementation of public policies aimed at quality improvement.

It is worth mentioning that in those years the evaluations carried out by international organizations, such as the OECD in 1991, represented a point of inflection in the quality assurance policies of the country (Coombs, 1991; OCDE, 1997).

The Institutional Evaluation of ANUIES

Also in the field of evaluation, the ANUIES (National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education) has participated, from its foundation in 1950, in the creation of programs, plans and national policies geared toward improving the quality of Mexico's higher education. ANUIES is a non-governmental association that brings together the main higher

education institutions in the country, both public and private, and thus represents one of the main interlocutors in the negotiations between the State and the affiliated universities and institutions of higher learning.

In this sense, one of the measures taken by the Association was to establish a rigorous process of member admission and permanence, which has been modified on an ongoing basis according to the context. Thus, in 1995, it established a system of indicators and parameters for membership in the Association, relating to quality, development and academic consolidation: 51 general elements and 12 numerical indicators, which were modified and adjusted along the way until the establishment in 1998 of a "*Typology of Higher Education Institutions*," which organizes the institutional diversity analytically. It has been adopted as the basis for the development of policies and programs geared toward the improvement of the quality of the public institutions of higher education and their financing up to the present (Fresán y Taborga, 1998, 2002).

Currently ANUIES has 165 institutes of higher education, both public and private, from across the country.

The Accreditation of Private Institutions of Higher Education

The first institutional accreditation processes in Mexico were undertaken by the Federation of Private Mexican Institutions of Higher Education (FIMPES), an association founded in 1981, made up solely of private universities. According to its regulations, its purpose is to promote academic excellence and institutional quality, improve communication and collaboration among its members as well as with the rest of the educational institutions in the country, all the while respecting the mission and philosophy of each one, to fulfill its responsibility of serving the nation.

In 1992, FIMPES began its work as an accreditation agency for the private institutions. For this purpose, it established the "System for Admission and Permanence in FIMPES, through the Strengthening of Institutional Development." The accreditation of institutions, according to FIMPES, is a process through which an accrediting organization, which functions through associations, and which is reliable, objective, independent and transparent, verifies that an institution: a) is what it says it is, b) provides what it offers, c) guarantees the minimum standards of quality necessary in a strong academic offering and that it is committed publicly to raising the levels of quality that it currently possesses through a process of continuous improvement.

FIMPES has updated its Accreditation System taking into consideration the new trends in higher education and the needs of the country, such that the indicators that it includes have gone from inputs, processes and some results in Versions 1 and 2 to Version 3, currently in operation, which emphasizes the educational results (learning outcomes) and transparency.

The institutional accreditation of FIMPES seeks to highlight quality institutions, improve the quality of educational services and exercise influence on the prestige and public image of the private institutions in the educational field. The benefits of institutional accreditation for the institutions of higher learning, according to FIMPES, are: a) to identify the existing similarities and/or differences in relation to the indicators of the Accreditation System (minimum requirements

for the achievement of a quality educational project), b) create in a holistic manner a self-diagnostic tool of its processes and document its processes and systems, and thus create a model of quality based on the needs of the institution; c) generate competitive advantages, d) display the FIMPES accreditation, provided that they indicate its validity and the sites or campuses that it includes, e) achieve prestige at the national and international level, f) increase trust of its current and potential students in the solid nature of the institution, g) experiences will be exchanged between academic peers.

The accreditation system is characterized because the participation of the IHEs is voluntary and at the institutional level; for *multicampus* institutions, all of its campuses are included; it evaluates the functions of Teaching, Research and Extension as well as the physical spaces, academic support and services. The character of the accreditation is a form of self-regulation, based on the process of peer-review that requires a strong institutional commitment, always within the framework of respect for institutional autonomy.

Currently the FIMPES brings together 106 private institutions, of which 80 are accredited and 46 have the "outright" rating. It is worth noting that the Department of Public Education has recognized since 2002 the process of accreditation and facilitates, for institutions that have obtained the highest rating, their entry into the Program of Administrative Simplification. This helps in achieving the Recognition of Official Validity of Studies (RVOE) for each academic program, a requirement established by the Mexican federal government for private IHE in Agreement 286.

Evaluation and Accreditation of Academic Programs

The evaluation of academic programs in Mexico began in 1991 with the creation of the Inter-Institutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CIEES). CIEES is a non-governmental organization, whose main functions center on diagnostic evaluation and accreditation of academic programs, as well as the rating and advising of IHEs to increase the quality of such programs. However, for 17 years this organization focused its actions on diagnostic evaluation and did not carry out program accreditation, a task that from the creation of COPAES (Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education) was assigned to the accrediting organizations recognized by this Council in 2002. CIEES seek to promote: a) the constant improvement of the quality of the higher education programs through recommendations that support the IHEs for the accreditation of their programs by organizations recognized by COPAES; b) the possibility of having a double control of the quality of the academic programs, whose coherence guarantees the movement from the programs from level 1 to accreditation; c) collaboration with the educational authorities of the country in their purpose of raising and ensuring the quality of higher education and d) providing information to society about the indicators of the quality of higher education.

These agencies are made up of nine committees, of which seven are academic or disciplinary because they evaluate the programs according to the area of knowledge that correspond to them: 1) Architecture, Design and City Planning; 2) Arts, Education and Humanities; 3) Agricultural Sciences; 4) Natural and Exact Sciences; 5) Health Sciences; 6) Social and Administrative Sciences; 7) Engineering and Technology. The two remaining ones

evaluate the functions of: 8) Diffusion, Connection and Extension of Culture; and 9) Administration and Institutional Management.

Also, they have criteria, indicators, and standards of evaluation associated with each of these elements. The fulfillment of all these requirements established in this framework are those required so that an academic program may be classified as accreditable (level 1) and, as a result, to be eligible for accreditation by an organization recognized by COPAES. Figure 1 shows the evolution of the evaluation of the university programs by the CIEES in the period 2001-2011.

Accreditation of Programs by Organizations Recognized by COPAES

In order to fulfill the international commitments assumed in 1992 as a result of the signing of the Free Trade Agreement¹ and to advance from the diagnostic evaluation developed by the CIEES to the accreditation of programs, in 1997 ANUIES agreed to create a non-governmental organization whose purpose was to regulate and give technical and operational certainty on the specialized organizations dedicated to accrediting academic programs.

Thus, at the end of 2000, the Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education (COPAES) was created, an organization recognized by the SEP for granting formal recognition to organizations whose purpose is to accredit academic programs of higher education that are offered by public and private institutions, as well as for regulating the technical and operational capacity of these organizations.

The functions of COPAES are, among others, to create guidelines and criteria for formally recognizing the program accrediting organizations. To evaluate the organizations that seek recognition as accrediting organizations, to make public the relationship of accrediting organizations and accredited programs, to supervise that the criteria of the accrediting agencies has academic rigor and impartiality, support the knowledge of the quality of the academic programs in society, execute agreements with the federal and state educational authorities and establish contact with analogous organizations in other countries.

The accreditation of programs offered by organizations recognized by COPAES has a duration of five years and is renewed for equal periods if the program demonstrates once again that it fulfills the quality standards. As of July 2012, COPAES has recognized 27 accrediting organizations. Figure 2 shows the evolution of the accreditation of programs from 2002 to 2012.

The Relationship Between Evaluation and Financing

Finally, it is important to mention that in the period 1990-2000 the Mexican government generated different programs to support the public universities with extraordinary resources intended for the improvement of different institutional elements, among them, accreditation.

¹ The FTA (1992) established that "The parties will encourage the pertinent organizations in their respective territories to create mutually acceptable norms and criteria for granting licenses and certifiers to the providers of professional services" and that they could be created in relation with the accreditation of schools or academic programs.

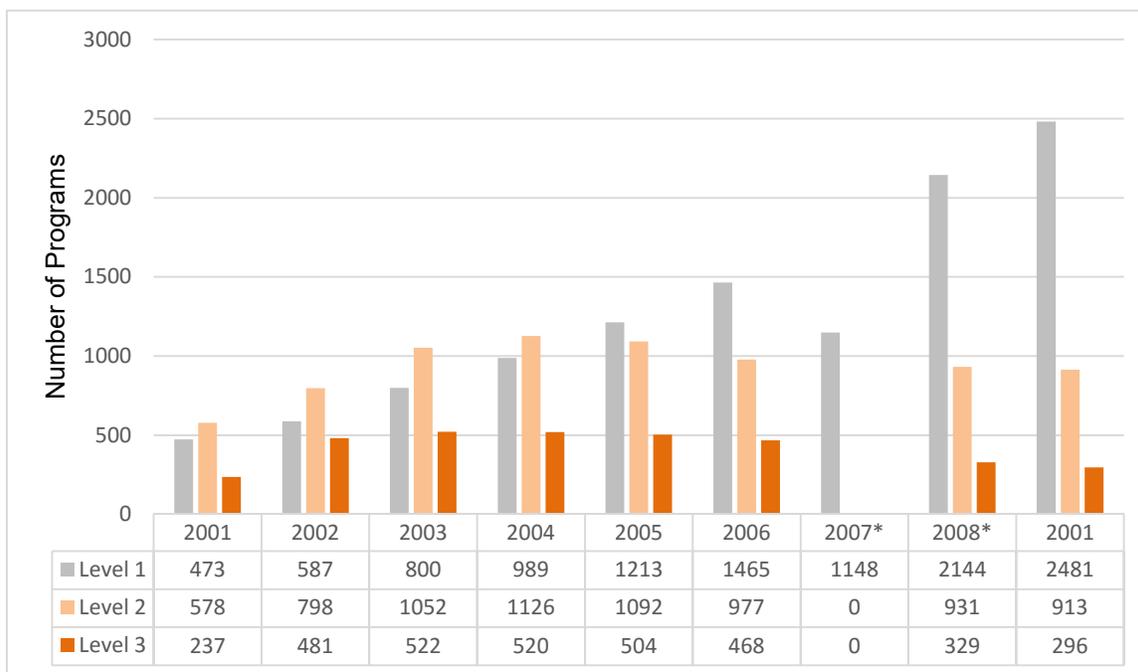


Figure 1. Evolution of the evaluation of the university programs by the CIEES in the period 2001-2011. Source: Rubio Oca, 2006; www.ciees.edu.mx/ciees/reportes. For 2007 and 2008, no data was available for levels 2 and 3.

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Public Institutions	97	194	364	515	765	1025	1232	1487	1664	1830	1884
Private Institutions	59	83	112	198	314	394	437	536	550	576	590
Total	156	277	476	713	1079	1419	1669	2023	2214	2406	2474

Figure 2. Evolution of the accreditation of programs from 2002 to 2012. Source: SEP. Cut-off date: April, 2012.

Such programs show the evaluation-financing-institutional change relationship and attempt to articulate the efforts carried out in the area of evaluation and accreditation with the purpose of creating a National System of Evaluation and Accreditation. The programs that have been key in this process are: PIFI (Comprehensive Program for Institutional Strengthening), PROMEP (Professorial Improvement Program) and PRONABES (National Scholarship Program for Higher Education). Of these, PIFI has been the most relevant because it has become the program that promotes institutional change through access to extraordinary resources based on an Institutional Development Plan that incorporates projects aimed at influencing the improvement of quality, through indicators of capacity and academic competitiveness.

The PIFI directly impacts the evaluation by the CIEES and the accreditation by organizations recognized by COPAES. In addition to the training of teaching staff, the development of academic bodies, the updating of plans and programs of study and flexibilization,

the incorporation of educational focuses centered on student learning, the intensive use of information technologies, improvement in the student retention rate, the certification of strategic management processes in the ISO norm 9001-2000, the adjustment of the organic structure and institutional guidelines and the development of mechanisms that allow transparency and accountability to society.

To conclude, it is worth noting that the changes that have taken place in the higher education system in Mexico in the last few decades have been propelled mainly by policies promoted by the federal government, whose main axes have been evaluation and accreditation. Such actions faced resistance in the beginning by public institutions, but currently they enjoy acceptance and are valued as mechanisms that guarantee quality and where prestige and recognition are certified by groups of experts. In this sense, through processes of accreditation and evaluation, the educational institutions have developed diverse relationships with their surroundings, the students and professors, the government and Mexican society in general within a framework of credibility and accountability.

The challenge lies in consolidating and maintaining this relationship in all educational institutions as a mechanism of transformation, and that is not used only as a means to access resources and the market.

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