Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Spain:
An Overview of the Accreditation System
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Abstract

Accreditation has become an important issue in Spain. This paper presents an overview of Spain's accreditation system; a system which is relatively new and has evolved rapidly, fostered by legislative mandates which established accreditation bodies to regulate the quality of higher education institutions. One of the initial challenges faced by accrediting agencies and universities in Spain was the need for a national curricular reform to transform the degree offerings across the country to match with the new European degree system. Discussion about the emergence of the accreditation system and the experiences of accreditors and academics during the nationwide curricular reform are included.

Keywords: Accreditation; accrediting agencies; quality assurance; curricular reform; higher education; Europe; Spain

Quality assurance has become a very important matter for higher education institutions in Spain. The increased pressure for accountability and the need for reliable methods to determine higher education quality are among the factors that propelled the establishment of accreditation agencies in the country. Legislation mandating the creation of a national accreditation and evaluation agency was fundamental to the emergence and adoption of quality frameworks and quality standards. The Bologna Process has resulted in the formation of the European Higher Education Area, EHEA, prompted to some extent the development of accreditation bodies and implementation of accreditation processes in Spain.

For the benefit of the readers who are not familiar with the Bologna Process, I insert here a brief summary, which I have discussed in previous publications. In 1999, in a meeting at the University of Bologna, ministers of education from 29 European countries signed the *Bologna Declaration* making a commitment to transform, through cooperation, an archaic assortment of universities (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Higher education systems across Europe were incompatible; degrees awarded were not equivalent; time to degree completion varied from country to country; there was no common or compatible system of credits; the differences made mobility difficult; quality assurance methods were needed; and there were many other issues derived from historical and national factors (Ríos, 2011). The implementation of the Bologna Process has had an unprecedented impact on European higher education; Spain was one of the original signers in Bologna. Specific objectives included: adopting comparable degrees across Europe; implementation of a credit system to permit transferability; embracing equivalent methods and criteria for quality assurance; facilitating international mobility for students,

faculty, researchers, and university administrators (EU Rectors & CRE, 2000, p. 4). A major accomplishment was the negotiation, development, and adoption of the European standards and processes for quality assurance. For the tenth anniversary of the *Bologna Declaration*, there were 47 participating countries; a new declaration covering the decade 2010 to 2020 was signed, and the name of European Higher Education Area, EHEA, was officially adopted (Budapest-Vienna Declaration, 2010, para. 1).

Higher Education institutions in Spain have experienced major transformations and challenges in the last decade, in the process of aligning their programs and degree offerings to the standards of the European Higher Education Area. Meeting the criteria established by the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* and assuring the quality of the professoriate has become central to the work of national and regional accrediting agencies in the country. Universities across Spain have been subjected to external demands for accountability and have had to demonstrate that they meet quality indicators. The emphasis of the discussion in this study is on the existing quality assurance agencies in the different regions of the country and the extensive curricular reform that has been accomplished by universities across the country. The findings of this research are certainly relevant for international cooperation and partnerships as well as for practitioners in the field of international higher education interested in establishing exchange programs with universities in Spain.

Scholarship on Higher Education Quality in Europe and Spain

Higher education institutions around the world have been faced with unprecedented demands for accountability. External quality assurance organizations, dedicated to establishing standards or criteria to evaluate higher education institutions, have emerged across the globe. Determining the quality of higher education institutions has become the topic of a considerable number of scholarly articles and research papers. In Europe, the scholarship related to higher education quality became important with the advent of the Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area. Parallel to the proliferation of books, journal articles, and other publications on the subject, there has been a worldwide growth in the number of conferences, symposiums, forums and other events related to higher education quality. Review of the literature on higher education quality shows that many of the publications are produced by the organizations in charge of determining the quality of higher education systems. Some of the matters covered in the literature include: assessment and learning outcomes (ENQA, 2005; Adamson, *et al*., 2010; Kallioinen, 2010; Nair, 2013; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Shavelson & Kuhn, 2015); lifelong learning (Kehm & Lischka, 2001; European Commission, 2008; ESU, 2010b); accountability (King, 2007; Rosa & Teixeira, 2014; Raban & Cairns, 2015); quality in teaching and learning (Leitner, 1998; Požarnik, 2009; Kehm, 2010; Nen, 2014; international cooperation (Nyborg, 2003; Sursock & Smidt, 2010; ESU, 2010a; Papatsiba, 2014); student involvement (Bateson, & Taylor, 2004; Berlin ESIB, 2007; Pabian & Minksova, 2011); internal and external quality assurance (Raban, 2007; Kehm, 2010; Blackstock, 2012; Eaton, 2013);

mobility (Zgaga, 2006; Brus & Scholz, 2007; Wächter, 2013; Behle, 2014); and transparency (Costes, *et al.*, 2010; Garben, 2010; Westerheijden, 2014).

      Quality assurance in higher education in Spain is addressed in a number of recent scholarly publications. Most of the themes covered in these publications are similar to those addressed in the literature of quality assurance for other European countries. Subjects such as assessment of student learning outcomes (Martín, 2006; Pierce & Robisco, 2010; Ion & Cano, 2011; Duque, L.C., Duque, J.C. & Suriñach, 2013; Lopez-Pastor, Pintor, Muros & Webb, 2013; Ramos, *et al.*, 2015); accountability (Fernandez, 1997; Jimenez, M. P., 2007; Marti, Puertas & Calafat, 2014; Arribas & Martínez, 2015); competencies and labor market demands (Ion & Cano, 2011; 2012; Lafuente, Martinez, Palacio-Massotti & Pardinas, 2012; Gonzalez, Arquero & Hassall, 2014); internationalization and mobility (Rodríguez, M.J., 2011); educational reform (Pinto, 2010; Cruz-Castro & Sanz-Menéndez, 2015); and the quality of the professoriate (Jimenez & Palmero, 2007; Pozo, Bretones, Martos & Alonso, 2011; Trullen & Rodriguez, S., 2013; Hernández-Pina, 2014) are frequently addressed in the literature.

      A frequent theme in scholarly publications about the quality of higher education in Spain is the influence of financial aspects (Pérez, 2004; Fernandez & Vaquero, 2005; Jimenez, M.P., 2007; Hernández & Pérez, 2010). The recent national economic crisis in Spain has limited some of the financial resources available to higher education institutions; therefore, this is a recurrent theme in the literature.

      The struggle to determine and improve the quality of its university system is not exclusive of Spain. As mentioned above; this trend can be seen in most European countries and has been a central part of the recent changes promoted by the European Higher Education Area. The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education published, in 2005, the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ENQA, 2005). The European ministers of education adopted these standards during the Bologna Process summit held in Bergen, Norway in 2005 (Bergen Communiqué, 2005).

Scope and Limitations

      The scope of this paper is limited to the analysis of the accreditation system that regulates higher education institutions in Spain, with the objective of providing an overview of the recognized accrediting bodies that determine institutional quality in the country and on the work of these agencies with higher education institutions in the extensive national curricular reform. The discussion presented here is based on field research conducted in Spain; visits to a dozen universities; interviews with university administrators, faculty members, and accreditors; and review of selected documents published by accrediting agencies, universities, and other key stakeholders. Only public universities were included in the interviews. Due to the purpose and scope of the paper, I set limits to the aspects covered. I focus on portraying an overview of Spain's quality assurance system for higher education, discussing the scope of responsibilities of the different stakeholders involved in the determination and improvement of the quality of higher education institutions in Spain. The study examines: the responsibilities of the external quality

assurance agencies, the roles of national and regional organizations, and the changes that have occurred at the university level as a result of the adaptation to the European Higher Education Area, including the national curricular reform.

This article will not address specific indicators of quality or details of the processes for quality assurance at the institutional level. I have set limits to the sources reviewed, as the abundance of reports produced by accreditors and institutions is vast. The interviews held in Spain were mostly in Spanish, in which I am fluent. While most of the accrediting bodies provided responses and documentation in Spanish or in English translations, some of the responses and documents analyzed were written in the regional languages spoken in Spain. I translated some of the original documents and statements from *Spanish*, *Català, Valencià, Galego,* and *Euskara*; I have proficiency in Spanish, but while not fully proficient in the other regional languages of Spain, I was able to analyze the material, and I assume the responsibility for the translations.

Methods and Procedures

In addition to the extensive review of literature, the research approach selected for this study is qualitative, and includes document analysis and interviews. During the process of research, sources of information not originally contemplated were identified.

In preparation for this study, requests for interviews and for access to relevant accreditation documents were made to the national accreditation agency in Spain, *Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación* (ANECA)*,* and to a number of universities in different regions of the country. Accreditors and quality experts in higher education in Spain were consulted for assistance in selecting the institutions to be visited. Contacts were made with the responsible persons at the institutions and a schedule for visits and interviews was established. Letters requesting interviews and including sample questions were sent to selected participants, including accreditors, higher education institutions, and recognized experts in quality issues in higher education in the country. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were scheduled and were conducted in the field. Interviews took place at the participant universities or in the accreditor's offices.

The documents analyzed include relevant legislation impacting higher education accreditation; the published and disseminated standards, policies, and procedures of accrediting agencies; institutional self-studies, strategic plans, assessment plans, internal policies and procedures; and a myriad of documents developed by the institutions. In addition, relevant documents were obtained from the Ministry of Education.

Official documents containing policies and procedures are important research data. Creswell (2008) considers that documents can provide significant and valuable data for a researcher: "these sources provide valuable information in helping researchers understand central phenomena in qualitative studies" Creswell (2008, p. 230, para. 5). As Best & Kahn (1989) indicated: "Documents are an important source of data. … [W]hen document analysis is used as descriptive research, current documents and issues are the foci. The analysis is concerned with the exploration of the status of some phenomenon at a particular time or its development over a

period of time" (Best and Kahn, 1989, p. 90, para. 3). Also, according to Best and Khan: "Content or document analysis... is helpful in evaluating or explaining social or educational practices" (Best and Kahn, 1989, p. 92, para. 1).

　　　　Important additional sources of information about the status of accreditation in Spain were discovered as a result of contacts established. A number of documents and studies of the status of accreditation in some of the regions were obtained and analyzed as well.

　　　　For this research, interviews were an important source for understanding the matter under study. Creswell (2008) affirms that during an interview, "the interviewer has better control over the types of information received, because the interviewer can ask specific questions to elicit this information" (Creswell, 2008, p. 226, para. 2). According to Merriam (1998), interviews are an important source of qualitative data. Interviews are considered by Best & Kahn (1989) to have some advantages in qualitative research as they allow participants to expand in the description of the phenomena under study. Best and Kahn have indicated that it is generally easier for people to have a conversation and give oral answers than to prepare written responses: "The interview is often superior to other data-gathering devices. One reason is that people are usually more willing to talk than to write" (Best & Kahn, 1989, p. 201, para. 2).

　　　　Interview protocols were specially designed for this particular study. The participants in the interviews conducted for this research were accreditation officials, university administrators, faculty members, and university students. They were willing to answer questions and capable of communicating and discussing accreditation issues. Creswell (2008) has indicated that "One-on-one interviews are ideal for interviewing participants who are not hesitant to speak, are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably" (Creswell, 2008, p. 226, para. 5).

Who Controls Higher Education in Spain?

　　　　The government involvement and governance of higher education institutions in Spain is quite different from the model we are used to in the U.S. The control of higher education in Spain also has distinctive features from other countries in the European Higher Education Area.

　　　　There are multiple players exerting external control over universities in Spain. The central government of the country has an authority over what happens in higher education. Spain's national government exerts control over universities through legislative acts and nationwide laws that affect universities across the country. Legislative acts and royal decrees are signed by the king. There have been a number of parliamentary resolutions passed in the last decade regarding higher education. As does other European countries, Spain has a Ministry of Education; the full name of Spain's ministry is "Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport" (*Ministerio de Educación Cultura y Deporte*). The ministry has specific responsibilities concerning the country's higher education system. The control of the higher education system in the nation is vested in the Minister of Education. Under the minister of education there is a Secretariat of Education (*Secretaría de Estado de Educación, Formación Profesional y Universidades*) and a General Secretariat for Universities (*Secretaría General de*

Universidades); each of these entities has its respective officers and specific responsibilities regarding higher education institutions.

Spain has 17 *Comunidades Autónomas or* autonomous communities, which have specific powers under the law regarding their local universities. Governments in these autonomous communities have also a stake in higher education. Given that autonomous communities provide funding for public higher education, regional governments also have authority over their institutions. Regional parliaments enact laws concerning the universities in their area. The scope of government control varies from region to region, but regional governments have substantial responsibilities for the quality of the universities and can be involved in different ways, for example, creating new programs, eliminating programs, or deciding to support specific research or innovations. In some instances, these responsibilities are delegated to a regional minister in charge of higher education in the specific region of the country. Universities also have an internal structure of governance and are usually led by a *Rector* who holds a post similar to that of our university presidents.

There is a legal framework within which universities in Spain operate. While this paper does not intend to cover in detail how the legal framework has evolved, it is necessary to mention the legislation controlling higher education. Spain's higher education law is referred to as *Ley Orgánica de Universidades* (LOU)*,* which can be translated as "Organic Law of Universities" (LOU, 2001). In 2001 the King of Spain, Juan Carlos I, signed this national law that regulates the university system. The acronym used for the legislation is LOU/2001.

The LOU was amended and became *Ley Orgánica de Universidades Modificada, LOMLOU,* or in my translation: "Law of Universities Modified" (LOMLOU, 2007). The amendments to the law took place in 2007 and the amended law is known as LOMLOU/2007. I will use these acronyms, LOU/2001 and LOMLOU/2007, to refer to these laws hereafter.

The policy-making organism issuing nationwide policies affecting higher education is a joint council that includes the nation's Minister of Education and the ministers in charge of higher education from the autonomous communities across the country. This policy-making organism is named *Conferencia General de Política Universitaria.* For the purpose of this paper I will refer to this council as "University Policymaking General Conference of Ministers" [Author's translation].

In addition to the council mentioned above, there is a council formed mostly of university administrators called *Consejo de Universidades* or, in English "Council of Universities" [Author's translation]. The "Council of Universities" is an advisory body and includes university presidents or *rectores* from both public and private universities as well as the nation's Minister of Education. The organic higher education laws LOU/2001 and LOMLOU/2007 specify the responsibilities of this council.

The national councils "Council of Universities" and "University Policymaking General Conference of Ministers" discussed above are part of the overall organization and governance of the higher education system in Spain. There are a number of additional bodies at the local,

regional, and national levels, involved in the regulatory aspects of higher education institutions. The internal governance and policies of each university create another layer of authority.

When this research was conducted, the Spanish higher education system included 50 public universities and 29 private higher education institutions. The number of public universities continues to be the same at the time of preparing this paper. There are now 33 private higher education institutions. As previously mentioned, private universities were not included in the interviews leading to this paper. Most of the public universities (48 of the 50) are funded from the autonomous communities where they are physically located. Only two public higher education institutions depend primarily on the Ministry of Education for funding (Pérez, 2004, p. 307, para. 3).

Overview of Quality Assurance Agencies in Spain

Legislation LOU/2001 mandated the establishment of mechanisms of external quality assurance. The law specifically mandates the creation of a national accreditation agency and delineates its charter. LOU/2001, Title V states that the agency will be named *Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación* (ANECA)*,* which can be translated as National Agency for the Evaluation of Quality and Accreditation. The legislation has given ANECA the charge of guaranteeing the quality of the country's University System (LOU, 2001).

During my research, I visited the headquarters of ANECA in Madrid, and had the opportunity to conduct interviews. The agency has a very detailed action plan and multiple programs to assess quality. In order to ensure the quality of the whole system of higher education in Spain, ANECA coordinates with the regional accrediting agencies the processes of accreditation, evaluation, and certification. As the national accrediting agency, the functions and responsibilities of ANECA cover all universities across Spain.

The 17 autonomous communities are Andalusia, Aragon, Asturias, Balearic Islands, Basque Country, Canary Islands, Cantabria, Castille and León, Castille-La Mancha, Catalonia, Extremadura, Galicia, La Rioja, Madrid, Murcia, Navarre, and Valencia. Some of these communities have created their own "regional" quality assurance organizations. At the time of conducting this study, 10 of the autonomous communities had their own agency to monitor the quality of the universities in their own region. The universities located in autonomous communities that had not formed their own accreditation organization reported directly to ANECA.

According to ANECA's charter and bylaws, as an umbrella organization, the agency has the responsibility to coordinate and cooperate with the external quality assurance organizations established in the autonomous communities. The parameters for the cooperative work between ANECA and the regional agencies are delineated in LOMLOU/2007 and reflected in ANECA's bylaws (ANECA Bylaws, 2013, Art. 7, p.4). ANECA has the responsibility for assuring the quality of not only university degrees nationwide, but also those degrees offered or awarded by Spanish universities in foreign countries (ANECA Bylaws, 2013, Art.1.3, p.1). The mission statement of ANECA indicates that ensuring the quality of the higher education system in the

country is its main responsibility, and that the agency strives for fostering the improvement of all the Spanish universities. ANECA summarizes its mission and charter as follows: "To promote quality assurance (QA) in the system of higher education in Spain together with its continuous improvement and enhancement, through guidance and orientation, evaluation, certification and accreditation, thereby contributing to the consolidation of the European Higher Education Area and accountability to society" (ANECA, 2015b, para. 2) [English in the original].

ANECA officials interviewed for this study indicated that the agency strives to conduct its work with transparency, independence and objectivity. They define the organization as an agency dedicated to serving the society. It was mentioned that the agency is committed to the European standards for Quality in Higher Education (personal communication).

ANECA holds membership in several European and international quality assurance organizations. In 2003 ANECA became one of the founding members of the European Consortium for Accreditation, ECA. In the same year ANECA became a member of the accreditation organization *Red Iberoamericana para el Aseguramiento de la Calidad en la Educación Superior, RIACES,* which includes quality assurance agencies from the Iberic peninsula (Spain and Portugal) and Latin America. ANECA is a founding member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, ENQA, and has gained membership in the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, INQAAHE (ANECA, 2015a).

In the course of this research, an unexpected finding was to notice the linguistic diversity across the country; and to what extent the regional languages in Spain continue to be used for official documents and research. Accrediting agencies in the regions where a language other than Spanish is the official language have prepared materials and documentation in the language of their region. It was interesting to notice how proud the autonomous communities are of their regional languages and their efforts for preserving the linguistic richness of the country.

The ten regional quality assurance agencies are listed in **Table 1**. The names of the accrediting agencies are listed in English, followed by their actual names in the language of their regions (Spanish, Català, Valencià, Galego, or Euskara) and their acronyms.

Table 1

Regional Accrediting Agencies in Spain

1. Agency for Quality Assurance in the Galician University System, *Axencia para a Calidade do Sistema Universitario de Galicia, ACSUG*
2. Agency for Quality of the Basque University System, *Euskal Unibertsitate Sistemaren Kalitate Agentzia, UNIBASQ*
3. Agency for University Quality and Prospective Aragon, *Agencia de Calidad y Prospectiva Universitaria de Aragón, ACPUA*
4. Agency for University Quality Assurance of the Balearic Islands, *L'Agència de Qualitat Universitària de les Illes Balears, AQUIB*
5. Andalusian Agency of Knowledge - Direction of Evaluation and Accreditation, *Agencia Andaluza del Conocimiento - Dirección de Evaluación y Acreditación, AAC-DEVA*
6. Canarian Agency for University Quality and Educational Evaluation, *Agencia Canaria de Calidad Universitaria y Evaluación Educativa, ACCUEE*
7. Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency, *Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari AQU Catalunya*
8. Madrid Knowledge Foundation, *Fundación para el Conocimiento Madri+d, FCM* [The plus sign "+" is part of the official name]
9. Quality Assurance Agency for the University System in Castille & León, *Agencia para la Calidad del Sistema Universitario de Castilla y León, CSUCYL*
10. Valencian Agency for Evaluation and Prospective, *Agència Valenciana d'Avaluació i Prospectiva, AVAP*

During the interview, ANECA officials explained the work of the agency in coordinating and collaborating with the ten quality assurance agencies in the autonomous communities. While the regional agencies are responsible to ensure quality in the university system in their particular region, national legislation has determined the extent of the "shared" responsibilities of the regional agencies and ANECA. As I have mentioned before, the relations between ANECA and the regional accreditation agencies are regulated by the Organic Laws LOU/2001 and LOMLOU/2007. As noted above, the regional governments have also enacted laws concerning the higher education institutions in their own regions (LOU, 2001; LOMLOU, 2007).

Accrediting agencies in the autonomous communities have to respond to regional and national legislation. Regional agencies have competency over the evaluation, accreditation, and certification of higher education quality in their own regions, within the limitations that the laws (LOU/2001 and LOMLOU/2007) impose. During the interviews conducted, I found that some of the responsibilities of ANECA, the national agency, and the regional agencies overlap. The answers that I received indicate that there is, to some extent, a sharing of duties. However, the evaluation of academic personnel and the determination of faculty qualifications is under the responsibility of ANECA, mandated by a royal decree issued in October 2007 (Real Decreto, 2007). ANECA has formed committees or panels of experts in the different disciplines and has specific procedures for the evaluation of academics. In addition to evaluation by ANECA, academic personnel are also evaluated by some of the regional accreditors.

There have been legal challenges to the mandate of the evaluation of faculty by ANECA. Some academics consider the standards of some regional agencies to be higher and stricter than ANECA's standards. However, the Spanish Supreme Court *(Tribunal Constitucional)* has asserted that the evaluation of professors made by ANECA has validity across the country (Álvarez & Vallespín, 2014). A deeper discussion about evaluation of faculty is outside the scope of this paper.

There are significant differences among the accrediting agencies in Spain. ANECA is certainly different because of its national charge and its coordinating responsibilities for the overall quality assurance system of the country. The regional accrediting agencies present striking differences among themselves. These differences are based on several factors, including the number of institutions in each region, the funding provided by the local governments, the priorities of the region, the political environment, the location, and cultural factors such as language. A few examples follow to give a sense of the differences.

The number of universities under the responsibility of each regional accrediting agency varies from as low as one institution to more than a dozen universities. Comparing the number of higher education institutions under the responsibility of each agency, I found cases such as *AQUIB*, the agency for University Quality Assurance of the Balearic Islands, where there is only one university, in contrast with the quality assurance agency for the community of Madrid, *FCM,* where there are at least 15 higher education institutions.

As mentioned before, the regional government in the autonomous communities has regulatory jurisdiction over its universities, except in matters explicit in the Organic Laws LOU/2001 and LOMLOU/2007. Accrediting agencies and public universities in the autonomous communities receive funding from the local government and are supported in many ways by regional authorities. Therefore, the quality assurance agencies established by the autonomous communities have dissimilar resources. The internal organization and number of staff varies depending of the number of institutions under their responsibility.

Given that Spain's accrediting agencies operate within the overall framework of the European Higher Education Area, EHEA, the agencies have taken measures to maintain independent judgments in their processes and decision making. The adopted *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* include a standard requiring independence: "3.3 Independence - Standard: Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence" (ESG, 2015, p. 18, para. 7) [English in the original].

Spain's accrediting agencies place emphasis on their independent status in their publications and reports. All the agencies have regulations and procedures to ensure independent judgment in evaluation and accreditation decisions. Some agencies have some additional financial sources or their own budgets and capital resources. The agencies generally are governed by a board of directors or board of trustees. These boards usually include representatives from the universities, the government, and the community.

In comparison with the accreditation processes that I have previously studied in Latin-America and the U.S., I found that there is more government involvement in processes of quality assurance in Spain. Quality assurance agencies seem to strive to maintain transparency and independence from the government; however, organic laws such as LOU/2001 and LOMLOU/2007 and laws passed by the governments of the autonomous communities set parameters for government involvement. This is a political matter and universities and accrediting agency officials have to operate within the legal framework. The independence of the agencies from the government is a matter that raises questions and deserves further study. During the interviews, I perceived some uneasiness in answering questions about this issue. The statement by Eaton (2013) regarding the increased government involvement in the U.S. accreditation is certainly applicable to Spain: "[A]ccreditation is increasingly government-controlled, serving more and more as an instrument of government policy and making accreditors, increasingly, actors in the political world …" (Eaton, 2013, p. 1, para. 1).

Some regional agencies have achieved international recognition and are members of European or international quality organizations, while others remain local. For example, the quality assurance agencies in the regions of Cataluña (AQU), Andalusia (AAC-DEVA), Galicia (ACSUG), Castilla y León (ACSUCYL), Basque Country (UNIBASQ), and Madrid (FCM) have gained membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, ENQA. ANECA, the national accreditor, is also a member of ENQA (ENQA, 2015).

In another example, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, INQAAHE, a worldwide quality assurance organization, has included as full members the regional agencies of Andalusia (AAC-DEVA), Basque Country (UNIBASQ), and Cataluña (AQU). ANECA is also a full member of INQAAHE (INQAAHE, 2015).

Several of the accrediting agencies in the autonomous communities are recognized by the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education, EQAR, including: Cataluña (AQU), Andalusia (AAC-DEVA), Galicia (ACSUG), Castilla y León (ACSUCYL), Basque Country (UNIBASQ), and Madrid (FCM). This European registry includes higher education accrediting agencies that have embraced European quality assurance principles and demonstrated satisfactory compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. Spain's national accreditor ANECA is also recognized by EQAR (EQAR, 2015).

Most regional agencies were founded between 2001 and 2005, after LOU/2001 was passed. An exception is the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency, AQU, which was the first quality assurance agency in Spain, and which has existed even before the Bologna Process started in Europe. The agency was formed as a consortium for the quality of the university system in 1996 and subsequently modified its name to the current *AQU Catalunya* (AQU, 2015).

Quality assurance agencies have formed a national collaborative organization that includes regional accrediting agencies and the national agency, ANECA. This organization has been named: Spanish Network of University Quality Agencies *(Red Española de Agencias de Calidad Universitaria, REACU).* The creation of REACU took place in 2006 during a meeting of

agencies representatives in Tordesillas, Valladolid. The need of collaboration and mutual recognition was central to the formation of REACU. Universities in Spain were experiencing unprecedented changes as a result of the adoption of the European framework of comparable degrees and the European standards and processes for quality assurance. The Bologna Process and the national organic law, LOU/2001, had prompted an extensive curricular reform. Quality assurance agencies had to synchronize their processes and ensure that institutions under their responsibility met the challenges faced (ACSUCYL, 2006).

In its charter document the objectives of REACU are stated as follows: "REACU's main goals include promoting cooperation amongst Spanish university quality assurance agencies and contributing to creating the conditions for the mutual recognition of decisions…. and will act as a forum in which to put forward and develop standards, procedures and guidelines …" (REACU Charter, 2006, para. 4). [English in the original] This organization of quality assurance agencies, REACU, continues to play an important collaborative role as it includes representation of the regional accrediting agencies (ACSUCYL, 2006).

There are other influential organizations, such as the *Conference of University Presidents* (*Conferencia de Rectores de Universidades Españolas, CRUE),* which has just changed its brand to *"CRUE Universidades Españolas."* This association, formed by the university presidents, represents all higher education institutions in the country, public and private, and its general assembly includes the 76 university presidents in the country. The CRUE states that its role is to be the voice of the Spanish universities at the national and international levels. The CRUE is the representative of the academic community in dealings with the central government, the Ministry of Education, or national accreditors. The organization coordinates actions related to higher education policies and the shared interests of the Spanish university system. During my research I found that the CRUE brings an academic viewpoint to the national discussions; this is an association of universities supporting common goals. As a clarification, the CRUE is not the same organism as the "Council of Universities" discussed above, which also includes university presidents (CRUE, 2015).

Changes as a Result of Accreditation

In the midst of the Bologna Process and the implementation of a national accreditation, university administrators and the professoriate across Spain were faced with significant challenges. Important institutional and program changes have occurred since the adoption of the European framework of comparable degrees and the European standards and processes for quality assurance. An extensive curricular reform and emphasis on improving teaching and assessing learning outcomes have been part of the transformation.

The government initiative "University Strategy 2015" *(Estrategia Universidad 2015)* was launched in 2010 as a national strategic plan to be accomplished by the year 2015. One of its objectives was to modernize the Spanish higher education system. Universities were required to adapt their curricula and programs to be compatible with the European Higher Education Area. Universities had a time frame to make major adaptations and change their degree offerings to the

three-cycle curricular reform that had been adopted in most European countries (ESTR, 2010, p. 23). In the process of re-designing their degrees, universities had to make major changes "in terms of governance, financial structure, employability, strategic campus aggregations …" (ESTR, 2010, p. 23, para. 2). [English in the original] Higher education institutions were prompted to "offer comparable, flexible, diversified teaching that encourages mobility and life-long learning, that is cross-disciplinary and directly linked to the needs of society, and that prepares the students for the specific job market they face" (ESTR, 2010, p. 23 para. 2). [English in the original]

During the interviews I held in universities in different regions of Spain, I found that faculty and administrators had spent significant time and resources in accomplishing the curricular reform necessary to be compatible with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). A significant number of the degree offerings had been transformed to harmonize with the rest of Europe. Old degrees were being phased out to accommodate students who were in the process of completion. Universities established quality control measures and continued working with accrediting agencies in the numerous required processes. An overall sense of satisfaction with these accomplishments was reflected in the comments of university administrators and faculty members, especially the ones who had significant involvement in the process of curricular reform.

In 2012 ANECA, in collaboration with regional accreditors, issued a report stating that in just three years, universities across the country had transformed thousands of official degrees and adapted them to the European framework: *"Fruto del enorme trabajo de las instituciones de educación superior, en apenas tres años se ha concentrado la rápida renovación del diseño de varios miles de títulos oficiales, con el propósito de adaptarlos al nuevo marco europeo de enseñanza superior"* (ICU, 2012, p.7, para. 2).

The ANECA report also states that by the end of 2012, universities had nearly six thousand new degree titles adapted to the European framework, which had received favorable verification by the agency. Most of the degrees were new undergraduate and Master degrees. The agency report disclosed that new doctorate degrees were in the process of development: *"Así, al cierre de 2012, el conjunto de las universidades españolas cuentan con cerca de seis mil nuevos títulos con informe favorable para la verificación. A dichos títulos, fundamentalmente de grado y de máster, se prevé se añadan nuevos títulos de doctorado en un número importante"* (ICU, 2012, p.8, para. 1).

In its report of the status of universities in 2014, ANECA indicated that, since 2011, about two thousand new Masters and undergraduate degrees, and more than a thousand new doctorate degrees, had been developed in accordance with the European framework (ICU, 2014, pp. 15-16). ANECA recognized the hard work of universities and accrediting agencies in accomplishing this massive curricular reform (ICU, 2014, p. 16).

In my visits to different universities I found that several had created posts and committees dedicated to work on quality assurance or to work on documenting compliance with national or regional accreditation requirements. All academics, administrators, and faculty interviewed were

aware of the accreditation agencies and had been involved in some way in the curricular reform or in committees working on some facet of accreditation. I also found in the course of the interviews that administrators and faculty were, in general, proud of the achieved accomplishments in matters of meeting accreditation requirements. Some academic participants explained that, during the process, it was not always easy to keep up with their regular teaching and research responsibilities and to find time to work on multiple committees and prepare accreditation documents. There were a few who had some complaints about the never ending paper work and excessive documentation, or who referred to the process as very bureaucratic.

Most students seemed satisfied with the recent curricular changes and with the new degree structures and study cycles that have been designed to align across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The students interviewed were not aware of ANECA or the regional agency in charge of their university.

Comments from university administrators indicated that accreditation demands and processes had caused increased faculty involvement and teamwork. Some professors who used to work in isolation became more engaged and collaborative. Among academics, there was a sense of pride in the new degree offerings, and most agreed that the new degree offerings being implemented responded to the needs of society. Some academics indicated that the new curricula prepared their students better for the demands of the European employment market.

Despite the multiple challenges presented in a nation-wide establishment of an accreditation system and curricular reform, Spain's higher education system has achieved important results and has changed significantly. Universities across the country have now more than eight thousand new degree offerings that have received favorable accreditation reviews (ICU, 2014, p. 16). This research demonstrates the resilience and engagement of the professoriate and university administrators across Spain who had spent substantial time, beyond their regular responsibilities, working in many committees, councils, and task forces making sure that their institutions met the European Higher Education Area quality standards.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

The preceding pages present some of the complexities of the quality assurance system in Spain and the agencies in charge of the accreditation of higher education institutions. There are intrinsic differences in how the process of quality assurance emerged in Spain compared to how voluntary institutional accreditation was developed and functions in the U.S. While the aim of accrediting agencies worldwide is basically the same, bringing quality to higher education, the efforts for quality assurance in Spain and in particular the overall curricular reform that took place in a restricted time framework were worthy of study. The experiences and the coordinated work of universities in Spain offer lessons for universities in different settings, and provide ideas for further research questions, as there are many issues to explore.

Academics such as myself, who have been involved for years in curricular design and program development, appreciate the difficulties involved in changing the curricula, not only of a program, degree, or department, but of all the universities in a country simultaneously, which

seems like an unachievable task. The many hours of negotiation and compromise that we spend when modifying a degree plan, discussing which courses are more needed and which courses should be eliminated, have to be multiplied many times to produce all the curricular changes that the professoriate in Spain achieved. As I analyze the information retrieved from documents and interviews, it is clear that the legislatures, laws, ministers, and accrediting agencies created the authority for accomplishing the changes. However, the actual implementation of accreditation criteria and curricular reform was achieved at the institutions of higher education. University officials led the effort at the campus level, but it was the professoriate, the faculty, and staff members who did the field work and were able to achieve the transformation of the Spanish higher education system.

Higher education institutions in Spain have aligned their degrees and credit system to the European Higher Education Area. The adoption of the European standards for quality assurance has made universities in Spain even more open than before to international collaboration and partnerships, as international mobility is encouraged in the standards. Understanding the accreditation system currently in place in Spain, and the accreditation status of universities and programs, can be helpful for American universities and practitioners in the field of international higher education when selecting sites for exchange programs and in the process of making decisions on partnerships with universities in Spain.

In the course of this research, it was fascinating to find how regional languages continue to be central to the identity of the different regions of Spain. I had expected to have to translate material just from Spanish; instead, I found that languages such as Català, Valencià, Galego, and Euskara were used in their particular regions. The cultural diversity across Spain and among the autonomous communities would be an interesting area for future research. Another research question could be determining to what extent the decision of the regional governments to have their own accrediting body was influenced by regional pride.

Among the issues that deserve further study are the recent growth of the number of private higher institutions in Spain, their accreditation status, and internal quality assurance processes. Private universities were not included in the present study, and their proliferation brings up questions that should be studied.

Given that there is an emergence of online courses and programs in Spain, further research is needed to study the quality of online offerings across the Spanish higher education system and the approaches of accrediting agencies in the evaluation of online offerings.

A study of the academic profession in Spain is necessary. There are many issues about the faculty in Spain that would be important to study, such as professional motivations, gender issues, qualifications, workload, compensation, ranks, and academic freedom. An analysis of the results of the evaluation of academics by ANECA deserves further research.

Finally, I believe that a comparative study of the accreditation system in Spain with accreditation systems of other countries would be an interesting research project.

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