

# Trends in Accrediting Private Higher Education in Latin America

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Since Latin American governments have been unable to accommodate and absorb all the demand for higher education in this globalized world, an exponential number of new private universities have flourished during the last two decades. As a reaction to that, governments throughout the region are gradually increasing controls over private universities and their academic offer. Several federal accrediting organizations in different countries are setting up higher standards not only to open new institutions, but also to keep them officially accredited. Without an official accreditation it is almost impossible to run a university. This must be understood within the legal system that points governments as the ultimate accrediting agency for private higher education. Actions like these are a rather radical way of authorizing universities when compared with US procedures. Most, if not all, of Latin American countries follow a pattern of strong state control over tertiary education. This is probably due to European laws and legal traditions imported during the colony and subsequent stages of modeling Latin American higher education institutions after the European university.

A secondary and major issue for private universities is accreditation of new programs, especially graduate degree programs. Tertiary institutions are seeking to expand themselves toward the hottest markets of master's and doctoral programs. Graduate degrees are a key

element for people to obtain better jobs and income. However, there is an increasing concern among government policy makers that quality is at stake. Many private universities are graduating people without rigorous mechanisms to assess quality. This situation brings in the very controversial issue of defining quality for universities. According to several national research organizations throughout the region (CONACYT, CONICET, CONCYTEC, CONICIT, CONICYT, among others), quality is highly related to research productivity. Although many of these research organizations accept some practitioner-oriented graduate programs, the bottom line is that they should produce knowledge and use it to modify reality.

The above situation prompts to a third issue, namely the need of rethinking the parameters and assumptions used to define what is *quality*. Some academic administrators, at private universities, are complaining they are being measured up against standards that work better for universities with abundant public funding. Producing research is highly expensive. It demands cutting edge facilities, time to do research, and a full time type of student who is not present in many professional-oriented private universities. One of the main criticisms is that governmental accrediting agencies are not taking into account the professional orientation of many graduate degree programs. Although these organizations claim to recognize these differences, their definition of quality resembles the knowledge production

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benchmarks used for academic and research-oriented programs.

Governments' continued concerns about quality remains a genuine issue that has not yet been sufficiently addressed in many Latin American countries. A possible solution to these tensions can be found through opening accreditation to a broader set of agencies. This is already being applied in some Latin American countries with good results. Like in the United States, some accrediting bodies are very selective giving prestige to the universities that are accepted. Another possible alternative is to broaden standards of what is quality. Faculty research productivity is important to include in this definition. But, what about the real contributions these professionals programs are making on a

workplace? Shouldn't a program be judged also by its impact on students' practice? How well adjusted is a program to what is going on in the real world? These questions are essential for a successful professional degree that would generate alternatives to existing problems.

Finally, it is imperative to recognize the need of innovation. Quality is a crucial issue that affects universities and society as a whole. Measuring hard data and the amount of indexed journals may be easier to many statisticians. Yet, having a unilateral way of measuring and defining what quality is may produce outcomes that are against the very purpose of these interplaying institutions.