Construction of public policy of higher education with participation of the academic community, Colombian, case for recognition of virtual and distance learning programs

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Abstract. As of this date, 8641 academic programs are authorized by Colombia’s National Ministry of Education. Of these, 7923 are in-person, 404 are virtual, and 314 are offered at distance. Of the total number of virtual and at-distance programs, only 26 (3.62\%) are accredited in the high-quality rank. This low accreditation figure is attributed to a lack of evaluation instruments encompassing criteria to recognize high quality of virtual and at-distance programs. Given the previous, the academic community joined efforts to design and develop the program “Collective construction of criteria aimed at enabling recognition of high quality virtual and at-distance learning programs in Colombia”]. Regional workshops were conducted that succeeded in gathering representatives of around 100 Higher Education Institutions representing nearly 95\% of institutions offering virtual and at-distance learning programs in Colombia. The product of those workshops was consolidated and brought to the consideration of the Principals of those institutions for their respective validation. The validated version was submitted to the National Ministry of Education as a technical document that will support the public policy that rules accreditation of virtual and at-distance learning programs in Colombia.

1. Introduction
Online offer of high education (virtual, at-distance, and mixed) is a reality strongly on the rise at the world level [1, 2]. It suits people whose time, duties or place constraints prevent them from accessing higher education. In the case of higher education institutions, it stands as an alternative to increase their academic offer nationally and internationally. For governments of countries with low schooling, it represents an alternative to enable high education coverage of regions away from the large urban centres that concentrate the main higher education institutions [3, 4]. Colombia has 8641 learning programs authorized by the National Ministry of Education, as shown in Table 1. According to the previous, of the total number of learning programs authorized by the MOE in Colombia, 718 are offered through the Virtual and At-distance (V&D) modalities, and only 26 of them are accredited (3.62\%). The previous means that 96\% of V&D programs offered are not accredited as high quality. In order to qualify for the evaluation process towards accreditation, learning programs must have been used for a minimum time, a requirement not met by one part of this offer segment, but the decision to seek high quality accreditation is volunteer, without any obligatoriness [5].

Consequently, of the total V&D programs in Colombia, some can meet the life-time requirement and quality conditions but have failed to start accreditation process. Also, there are cases where quality and life-time conditions for evaluation process are met, and the IES unilaterally starts process, without reaching expected results, a situation potentially arising from two situations: 1) The program definitely
fails to meet quality conditions and must improve the areas highlighted by the assessment team, and 2) the assessment team failed to determine that the program does meet the conditions.

Table 1. Programs authorized by the National Ministry of Education. QR (Qualified Register), administrative act granted by the National Ministry of Education, authorizing offer of an Academic Program. HQA (High Quality Accreditation), administrative act granted by the National Ministry of Education certifying before society that the Program meets quality conditions.

| Formation level                  | In-person | Virtual | At-distance | Total |
|----------------------------------|-----------|---------|-------------|-------|
| Technical professional institution | 361       | 29      | 11          | 401   |
| HQA                              | 2         | 0       | 0           | 2     |
| Accredited percentages           | 0.55      | 0.00    | 0.00        | 0.50  |
| Technological institution        | 558       | 47      | 27          | 632   |
| HQC                              | 20        | 0       | 1           | 21    |
| Accredited percentages           | 3.58      | 0.00    | 3.70        | 3.32  |
| University-level institution     | 1640      | 160     | 82          | 1882  |
| HQA                              | 161       | 3       | 3           | 167   |
| Accredited percentages           | 9.81      | 1.88    | 3.65        | 8.87  |
| University                       | 5364      | 168     | 194         | 5726  |
| HQA                              | 1125      | 2       | 17          | 1144  |
| Accredited percentages           | 20.97     | 1.19    | 8.76        | 20    |
| Total offer                      | 7923      | 404     | 314         | 8641  |
| HQA                              | 1308      | 5       | 21          | 1334  |
| Accredited percentages           | 16.5      | 1.23    | 6.68        | 15.43 |

Upon debate of this situation, the national academic community concluded that despite the likely occurrence of situations associated with hypothesis 1, the low accreditation number can result from failure of evaluating team to identify compliance with quality conditions. Another conclusion was that V&D learning programs in Colombia are being evaluated through instruments built for accreditation of in-person modality programs. Despite the fact that no difference should exist between professional education objectives, and also that the programs of the different modalities (in-person, virtual, at-distance) must be evaluated through the same quality criteria, it was determined that evaluation instruments aiming at accreditation for programs offered as V&D must contemplate parameters that recognize the specificities of such modalities. In the absence of such specific criteria, evaluators are unable to recognize those specificities and end up applying evaluation criteria they apply for in-person programs, to the detriment of the quality of V&D programs. This situation led to the need to start a collective construction process with the participation of the national academic community that is part of the academic processes of V&D programs in the different higher education institutions.

2. Methodology
The project was carried out by the National Accreditation Council in the following stages:

2.1. Identification and participation of a group
Of a total of 297 academic institutions, around 100 represent the bulk of V&D programs. Along the second semester of 2017, academic representatives of these institutions were invited to join efforts with the Consejo Nacional de acreditación to diagnose the situation of V&D academic offer in the country.
2.2. Hold an international seminar that permits hands-on participation of the national academic community in elaboration of good practices in self-evaluation and evaluation of V&D programs
The representatives of Stage 1 participated in planning and execution of the project “Collective construction of criteria that will enable recognition of V&D learning programs in Colombia”.

2.3. Development of regional workshops for establishment at the national level of specific criteria to evaluate the quality of V&D learning programs in Colombia
Along 2018, regional workshops were conducted throughout Colombia, with participation of representatives of 89 higher education institutions (HIE), as shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Geographic distribution of the regional workshops conducted in Colombian territory.](image)

2.4. Construction of a unified evaluation criteria proposal of V&D programs incorporating the regional contributions
Deriving from the activity of each regional workshop, different proposals were generated and unified by the Coordinating team, incorporating not only commonly expressed criteria, but also criteria seldom repeated that contributed to characterization of V&D program specificities for Colombia’s academic community.

2.5. Submitting the unified proposal to the analysis of the academic community
The unified version corresponding to the collective construction of criteria to recognize the specificity of V&D programs was submitted to the principals of the different academic entities participating in the process.

2.6. Presentation to the National Ministry of Education of a unified proposal that will allow evaluation of the quality of V&D Learning programs in Colombia, with a contribution from the national academic community
The unified version, corrected through contributions of the expert teams proposed by the school principals, was presented to the Ministry of National Education as a collective construction work of the national academic community.
3. Results and discussion

3.1. Hold an international seminar that permits hands-on participation of the national academic community in elaboration of good practices in self-evaluation and evaluation of V&D programs

The project started with an international seminar carried out in the first semester of 2018, attended by national and foreign experts who discussed the challenges facing the process. Around 70 of the 110 higher education institutions offering V&D learning programs in Colombia attended. The project route map was presented, which called for participation in different regional workshops, and announced the adoption in the regional workshops of the methodology of “rubrics” or “matrixes of evaluation through referents” proposed by the National Ministry of Education in 2018 [5], which permits identification of the descriptors or criteria of evaluation of educational programs and institutions at different stages of consolidation or maturation.

Table 2. Quality conditions considered in the regional workshops.

| Quality conditions       | Number of features associated with each quality condition | Qualified Register - QR (First time) | Renewal of Qualified Register - QRR | High quality accreditation - HQA (First time) | Renovation of High Quality Accreditation – RHQA |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| At institutional level  | 4                                                       |                                         |                                     |                                               |                                                |
| 1. Students             | 2                                                       | 4                                    | 2                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 2. Teachers             | 2                                                       | 2                                    | 2                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 3. Graduates            | 2                                                       | 2                                    | 2                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 4. Research             | 3                                                       | 3                                    | 3                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 5. Well-being           | 3                                                       | 3                                    | 3                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 6. Institutional government | 5                      | 5                                    | 5                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 7. Quality planning and improvement | 2                   | 2                                    | 2                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 8. Administrative management | 6                  | 6                                    | 6                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 9. Infrastructure       | 2                                                       | 2                                    | 2                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 10. Financial resources | 3                                                       | 3                                    | 3                                   |                                               |                                                |
| At Program level        | 2                                                       | 2                                    | 2                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 1. Teachers             | 2                                                       | 2                                    | 2                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 2. Curricular management | 6                                                       | 6                                    | 6                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 3. Educational media    | 2                                                       | 2                                    | 2                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 4. Extension            | 2                                                       | 2                                    | 2                                   |                                               |                                                |
| 5. National and international Interaction | 2                      | 2                                    | 2                                   |                                               |                                                |

3.2. Development of regional workshops for establishment at the national level of specific criteria to evaluate the quality of V&D learning programs in Colombia

Participants in the regional workshops were asked to describe in each one of the characteristics associated with quality conditions a) at institutional level, and b) at the Program level, the specific criteria offered under the modalities of V&D, taking into account the Program’s different maturation stages, from qualified register to (QR) to High Quality Accreditation Renovation (HQAR). Accordingly, the matrixes developed in the different workshops took into account the quality conditions shown in Table 2.
3.3. Submitting the unified proposal to the analysis of the academic community

The unified version corresponding to the collective construction of criteria to recognize the specificity of V&D programs was submitted to the principals of the different academic entities participating in the process for revision of the whole process by the expert teams of each institution that received the document. Prudential lapse was provided to receive observations to the document, after which it was reviewed by the regional coordinators, who produced a second unified collective proposal.

3.4. Presentation to the National Ministry of Education of a unified proposal that will allow evaluation of the quality of V&D Learning programs in Colombia, with a contribution from the national academic community

The unified version, corrected through contributions of the expert teams proposed by the school principals, was presented to the Ministry of National Education as a collective construction work of the national academic community to identify the specific criteria that will allow evaluation of the quality of V&D Learning programs in Colombia, from the stage of Qualified Register, first time, to Renovation of High Quality Accreditation. At present, the Minister of National Education considers this document to be an important tool to generate the next Public Policy instruments that have been approved through administrative act, to guide the self-evaluation and evaluation processes of the quality of V&D Learning programs in Colombia.

4. Conclusions

This work ratifies the fact that a public policy process is amply recognized and welcomed inasmuch as this policy not only reflects the feeling of the recipient community, but also shows the logics of the community’s dynamics. In the case of this program, those criteria that allow recognition of the high quality of V&D Learning programs in Colombia are widely welcomed and supported by the academic community whose contributions make up the proposal and set a pathway for continued improvement corresponding to the logic and dynamics of processes inherent to virtual and at-distance learning. This work is the result of a process developed by the National Accreditation Council of Colombia, in a collective process of the National Accreditation Council of Colombia, in a collective construction effort by the national academic community, represented by participants from 112 higher education institutions and organizations, through regional workshops.

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