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Presenter's/Author's Name, Institution	Kevin Rolwing, World Education Services
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The New Accreditation and Quality Assurance Measures in Latin America: Argentina and Colombia

Presented by:

Kevin Rolwing
Assistant Director
World Education Services

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Graduate school admissions officers and other professionals who must establish the academic level of foreign university degree holders often revert to a basic formula when checking the status of the university attended—namely by verifying that the university or higher education institution *is recognized by the Ministry of Education as a degree granting institution*. As such, the status of “degree granting institution of higher education officially recognized by the Ministry of Education” constitutes the basic benchmark of academic institution legitimacy when considering the qualification of foreign degree holders. In the United States, the corresponding basic benchmark of institutional legitimacy is often considered to be the accreditation, regional or other, of an institution of higher education. Accreditation in the United States is not carried out by a governmental entity, but rather by well-established private not-for-profit autonomous accrediting bodies, such as the six regional accrediting bodies.

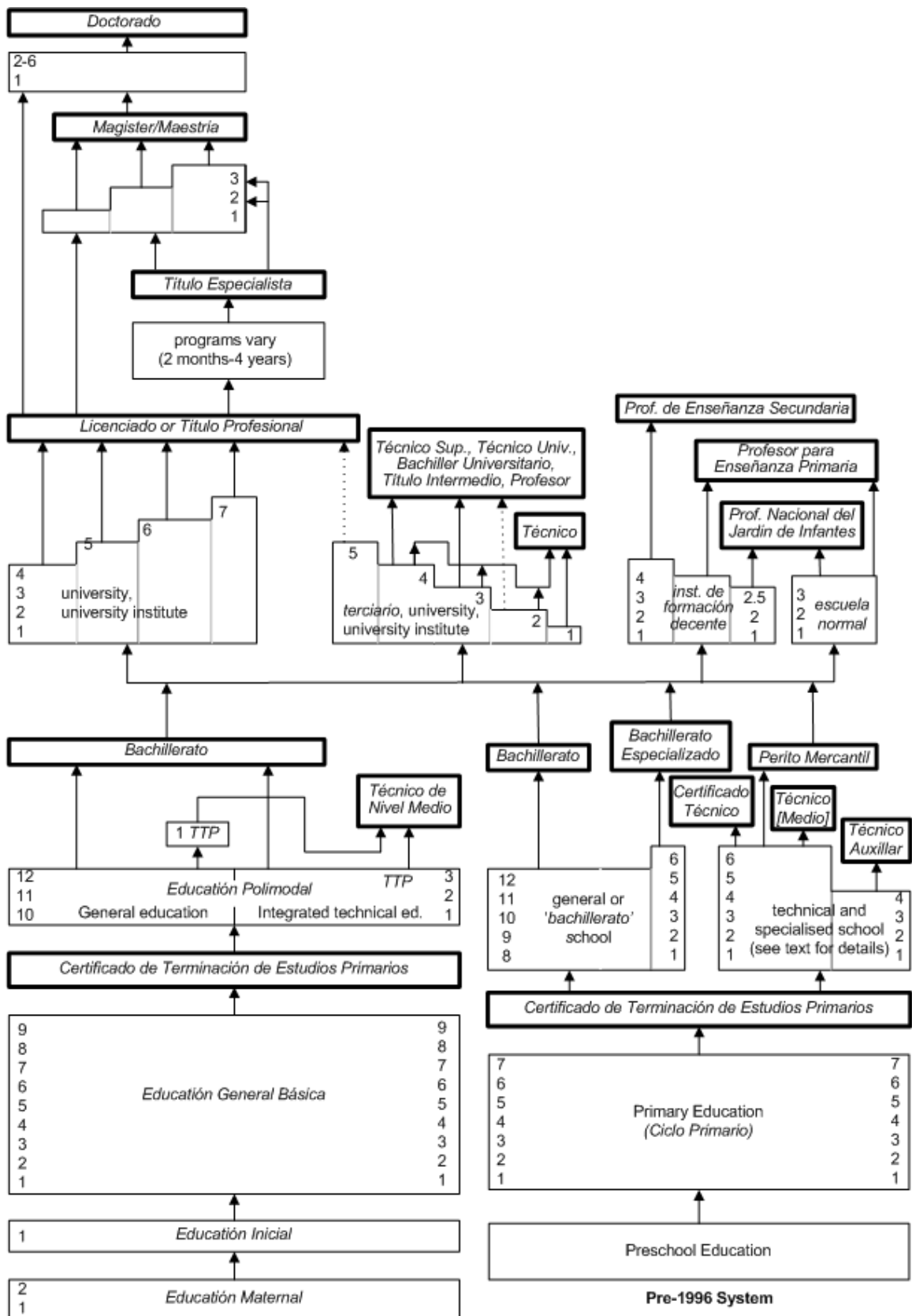
Ministerial recognition processes can be opaque to the outside observer, and ministerial recognition may sometimes be summarily granted to public institutions. The world over, quality assurance concerns have become paramount in recent years partly in response to the tremendous growth in higher education enrollment and in many countries in response to the growth in the number of private higher education institutions. Educational authorities around the globe have been developing mechanisms to define and establish educational standards and to stimulate quality assurance.

Many countries from around the world are introducing more transparent and rigorous accreditation systems based on external assessment in order to foster quality assurance and to motivate higher education institutions to adopt higher standards and better practices to achieve academic excellence and operational efficiencies and provide a social benefit to society at large. Some of the more salient examples include the forty-six Bologna Process signatory countries, most of the Latin American countries, and India. Accreditation processes are typically conducted by autonomous accrediting bodies that are independent of, or are decentralized from, the ministry of education and composed of teams of experts from various fields and often including members from other countries. Accreditation in these countries may constitute an additional quality assurance measure that goes above and beyond ministerial recognition procedures, or in some countries the ministry of education may require that higher education institutions or programs undergo accreditation as a condition of obtaining official recognition.

As compared to the old model of ministerial recognition based on academic institutions adhering to basic ministerial guidelines and the occasional inspection visit, accrediting bodies are expected to be more transparent in their methodologies and to motivate or compel academic institutions to become more accountable and innovative in their education services. A typical accrediting process includes the following main steps: a preliminary self-assessment by the academic institution, review of the self-assessment by the accrediting team, a multi-day visit by the accrediting team to the academic institution (the external assessment), formulation of a preliminary report by the accreditation team, delivery of the preliminary report to the academic institution, a revision of the report if necessary, and finally formulation and publication of the final report.

In this session we will take a look at the basic features of the new accreditation processes in three Latin American countries: Argentina, Colombia and Mexico. We will examine

what type of accreditation processes are being implemented: program/institutional, mandatory/voluntary, targeted/overall higher education sector, graded and qualified/simple up or down decisions and discuss what effects these accreditation processes are having on the higher education system. Finally, we will consider how these new accreditation processes might be taken into account in the United States, particularly in the area of graduate admissions.



<https://aei.gov.au/AEI/CEP/Argentina/EducationSystem/SystemDiagram/default.htm>

Accreditation in Argentina

The *Comisión Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria*-CONEAU (National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation) was created in 1995 by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and charged with the evaluation and accreditation of higher education institutions and programs. Every university institution must undergo a detailed evaluation by CONEAU, but non-university institutions are not part of this process. Those first university degree (*Licenciado/Título Profesional*) programs that have been declared to be of “public interest” are subject to degree program accreditation by CONEAU. (“Public interest” is explained below) In addition, all graduate level programs (*Especialista, Maestría, Doctor*) are now required to undergo program accreditation. Detailed information on the evaluation and accreditation processes can be found in the Spanish language at <http://www.coneau.edu.ar/>. Accreditation decisions are made public and are available at this website.

Institución Universitaria (University Institution) Evaluation

Each *institución universitaria* (university institution) that applies for official recognition or has previously received official recognition through the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology is required to undergo an institutional evaluation carried out by CONEAU. An *institución universitaria* is a university-level institution that has authority to award first university degrees such as the *Licenciado* or the *Título Profesional*, as well as graduate degrees such as the *Especialista, Maestría*, and *Doctor*. The term *institución universitaria* includes universities and *institutos universitarios*. Although at the same level as an *universidad* (university), an *instituto universitario* does not offer the full panoply of study programs or carry out the extensive research of a full-fledged *universidad*. As the first step in the evaluation process, the *institución universitaria* must complete a self-evaluation report outlining its mission and objectives, CONEAU then follows up with a visit from its accrediting team and prepares an external evaluation identifying the pertinence of the institution’s mission and its successes and difficulties in achieving its objectives. Areas of evaluation include faculty and teaching, research and extension, and financial resources and management. The results and suggestions for institutional improvement are made public in the final evaluation report available at the CONEAU website.

University Program Accreditation

The *Comisión Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria*-CONEAU (National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation) has also been charged by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to inspect and accredit study programs that “could do harm to the health, safety, legal status, welfare or development of citizens”. The following study programs that have been identified according to this criterion and have been declared of “public interest” are: medicine, 18 engineering disciplines, pharmacy, biochemistry, veterinary medicine, architecture, dentistry and psychology. Not all these areas of study have been subjected to a formal accreditation process on the part of CONEAU to date, but will be expected to in the near future. The

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in conjunction with the National Council of Universities formulates the professional privileges associated with the award of the university degree, the minimum number of study hours, the basic curricular content, required hours of practical training and accreditation standards for each of the “public interest” programs.

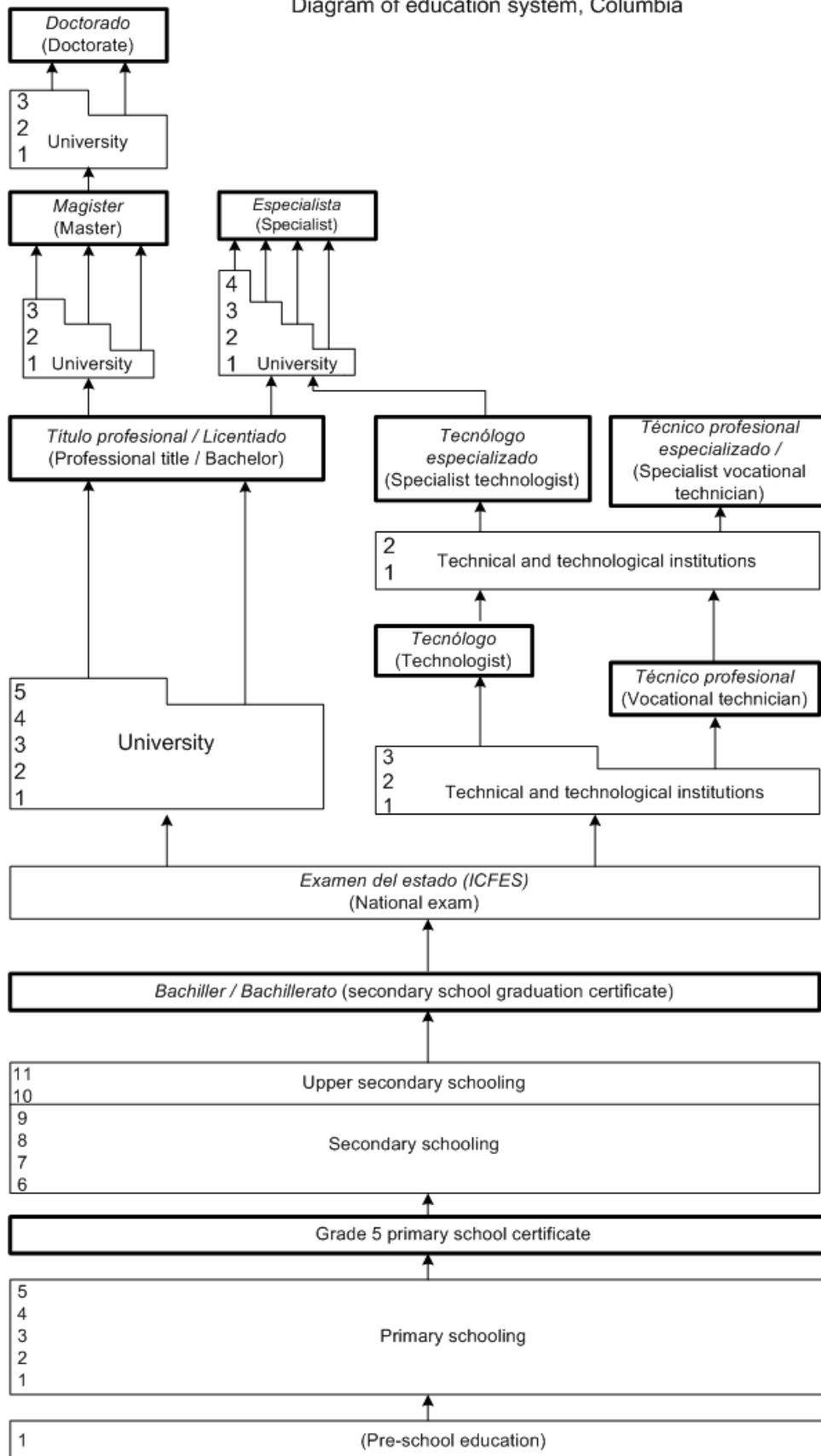
There are three possible outcomes following the “public interest” program accreditation process: full accreditation for a period of six years, accreditation for a period of three years for those programs that have satisfied the accrediting team of their general viability despite some notable deficiencies, and denial of accreditation to programs that have substantial deficiencies. Those programs of study that are determined to have serious and pervasive deficiencies and that are denied accreditation are subsequently referred to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology which then may suspend official recognition of the program.

Accreditation of *Posgrados* (Graduate Programs)

CONEAU is in the process of accrediting all *Posgrados* (Graduate Program) offered by universities in Argentina. There are three types of *Posgrados* in Argentina: *Especialista*, *Maestría*, *Doctor*. CONEAU evaluates each program through analysis of institutional framework, teaching faculty, study body, university infrastructure and library resources, and research and professional training facilities. Following the accreditation process, programs that are approved are awarded an “A (Excellent)”, B (Very Good), or C (Good) grade depending on CONEAU’s analysis of the quality of the program. First time accreditation decisions are valid for a period of three years, and second time accreditation decisions are valid for six years.

For further information and details concerning *Institución Universitaria* evaluation, “public interest” university program and *posgrado* accreditation, please visit the CONEAU website at <http://www.coneau.edu.ar/>

Diagram of education system, Columbia



<http://aei.gov.au/AEI/CEP/Colombia/EducationSystem/SystemDiagram/default.htm>

Accreditation in Colombia

With the ultimate objective of fostering excellence in Colombia's higher education sector the Ministry of National Education created the *Consejo Nacional de Acreditación* in 1992 whose mission is to implement various types of accreditation and quality assurance procedures. The different types of accrediting processes are detailed below.

Accreditation Previa (Prior Accreditation): Every *Licenciado* and *Especialista* degree program in the education and teacher training area must undergo this mandatory accreditation process in order to qualify for official recognition through the Ministry of National Education. To date (April 2009), the National Accreditation Council has accredited 821 different teacher training/education programs at both the *Licenciado* and *Especialista* levels.

Accreditation Voluntaria (Voluntary Accreditation): The National Accreditation Council has also devised this voluntary accreditation process in order to identify those higher education institutions and degree programs that have achieved a high level of quality (*alto nivel de calidad*), through analysis of various criteria such as faculty qualifications, curriculum, research, etc. This accreditation process is voluntary on the part of higher education institutions and should not be confused with the basic legitimacy of institutions and programs that is gained by way of official recognition as a degree granting institution of higher education on the part of the Ministry of National Education. As this process is envisaged, those institutions of higher education that have submitted several of their degree programs to the accreditation procedure and that have been subsequently accredited on the program level and earned the sobriquet of "high level of quality", are then eligible to apply to the Council in order to undergo an institutional accreditation process in order to earn the status of "*institución de educación superior de alta calidad*" (higher education institution of high quality). To date more than 700 higher education programs have earned the status of "program of high quality" and 15 institutions of higher education have been conceded the "higher education institution of high quality" label by the *Consejo Nacional de Acreditación*. The full list of "accredited" programs and institutions may be viewed by visiting the National Council of Accreditation website provided below.

The 15 institutions of higher education of high quality are listed below.

1. *Pontificia Universidad Javeriana*
2. *Universidad del Norte*
3. *Universidad Escuela de Administración y Finanzas y Tecnologías-EAFIT*
4. *Universidad de Antioquia*
5. *Universidad Externado de Colombia*
6. *Universidad Industrial de Santander*
7. *Universidad del Valle*
8. *Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira*
9. *Universidad de los Andes*

10. *Universidad Colegio Mayor de Nuestra Señora del Rosario*
11. *Universidad de la Sabana*
12. *Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana*
13. *Universidad de Caldas*
14. *Escuela Naval de Suboficiales—ARC Barranquilla*
15. *Universidad de la Salle*

Resources

Council on University Evaluation and Accreditation (Argentina): www.coneau.edu.ar/

Ministry of Education (Argentina): <http://www.me.gov.ar/>

National Council on Accreditation (Colombia): www.cna.gov.co/

Ministry of National Education (Colombia): www.mineducacion.gov.co/

Council for Higher Accreditation Accreditation CHEA (USA): www.chea.org/

US Department of Education Directory of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs: <http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>

National Office for Overseas Skills Recognition (Australia)—Country Education Profiles Online: www.aei.dest.gov.au/AEI/QualificationsRecognition/default.htm (subscription)