

June 21, 2024

Audit Report

**Comprehensive Audit of the National
System for Evaluation and
Accreditation for the Improvement of
Higher Education Quality**



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Introduction

Within the framework of its mission to strengthen the quality of higher education through international collaboration, the Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES) conducts this academic audit of the National Council for University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA). Responding to an explicit request from CONEAUPA, RIACES focuses on evaluating the transparency, effectiveness, and efficiency of CONEAUPA's procedures, aiming to identify the degree of alignment between these procedures and their practice.

RIACES is a civil organization that includes 45 members, comprising 37 public and private accrediting agencies in 18 countries across Central America, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Spain, in addition to 8 regional and international bodies. Operating as a non-profit and independent of any state or government, RIACES promotes educational quality assurance in its member countries. Its work focuses on promoting good practices in accreditation and certification, advancing knowledge about educational quality, and training entities and academic peers, ensuring the application of international standards and innovation in higher education.

It is important to highlight CONEAUPA's commitment to transparency and rigor in its evaluation and accreditation processes. CONEAUPA's dedication to improving its standards and procedures reflects a continuous effort to assure higher educational quality in Panama. This commitment strengthens trust in the Panamanian educational system and underscores the importance of maintaining an open and constructive dialogue about educational quality.

Audit Objective

The objective of this audit is to verify the integrity and effectiveness of CONEAUPA's procedures, ensuring their compliance with established standards.

Audit Scope

The Comprehensive Audit of the National Council for University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA) will cover the following aspects:

- Processes defined in the Single Decree of 2022 and the Internal Regulations of CONEAUPA.
- Strategic processes, mission processes (of Universities and Health Area Programs), support processes (accompaniments), and processes of evaluation, improvement, and control.
- Activities during the period between 2020 and 2023.



Methodology Used

A qualitative methodology is employed, combining detailed analysis of relevant documentation, interviews with administrative personnel, and focus groups including representatives from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), members of the Council, national and international peer evaluators, and representatives from accrediting bodies involved in CONEAUPA's accreditation processes. This approach enables a comprehensive audit of CONEAUPA's operations and effectiveness in its regulatory role.

Equipo auditor

- **Dr. Iván Ramos Calderón:** An Electrical Engineer from the University of Valle, with two master's degrees: one in Technical Informatics from the Federal Polytechnic School of Lausanne, Switzerland, and another in University Management from the University of the Andes, Bogotá. He received an Honorary Doctorate in Distance Education and Instructional Technology from UNAD Colombia in 2021. He was a full professor at the University of Valle where he also held multiple leadership positions, including Academic Vice-Rector and Rector. Currently, he is the President of RIACES and has served as the coordinator of the National Accreditation Council in Colombia. With extensive experience in academic management and accreditation, international evaluation, he has significantly contributed to higher education both in Colombia and internationally.
- **Dra. Olga Hernández Limón:** Holds a PhD in Human Resource Development from the University of Texas at Austin. She has extensive experience in university management and international evaluation and accreditation. She has held significant administrative and academic positions, including the General Secretary of the Autonomous University of Tamaulipas in Mexico and the Coordination of Interinstitutional Linkage at COPAES. Currently, she is an Advisor to the Executive Secretary of ANUIES and the Executive Director of RIACES, leading prominent initiatives such as the development of the Kalos Virtual Ibero-America Seal, which evaluates the quality of academic programs in distance and online modalities.

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Context of CONEAUPA

History and Regulatory Framework

The National Council for University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA) was established as the sole official accreditation agency in Panama, promoting the assurance of higher education quality. Its creation was formalized by Law 30 of July 20, 2006, based on previous provisions such as Decree Law 16 of 1963 that regulated private universities. This law was later repealed and replaced by Law 52 of 2015, which not only reaffirmed the



mandatory nature of accreditation for Higher Education Institutions but also expanded the scope and depth of the evaluation and accreditation system. Detailed regulations were consolidated with Executive Decrees No. 539 of 2018 and No. 1295 of 2021, culminating in Resolution No. 723-AL of 2022 that coherently organizes all current regulations.

Mission and Vision of CONEAUPA

CONEAUPA's mission, defined in Resolution No. 04 of 2020, is "To promote academic excellence in the core functions of Panama's HEIs through the accreditation of quality, the generation of public policy proposals, research, and innovation, in a context of respect for the environment, integrity, transparency, equity, and accountability." Its vision is "to be recognized as the benchmark for good practices in ensuring quality education at both national and international levels."

Evaluation and Accreditation Processes

CONEAUPA administers a rigorous and continuous accreditation system for universities in Panama, both public and private. These processes are legally supported and facilitate continuous improvement and evaluation of HEIs, thus promoting academic excellence and improving educational management. The governmental commitment to these processes was evidenced in the Signing Act of Commitment for the Reaccreditation of 23 universities in 2021, demonstrating significant national support.

Objectives and Policies of CONEAUPA

CONEAUPA's objectives, framed by Law 52, focus on fostering a culture of evaluation, strengthening the national accreditation system, and certifying educational quality. The agency's policies ensure the effective implementation of these goals through regulatory updates and continuous training, as well as active participation in international educational quality platforms.

Stages of the Accreditation Process

The audit of the accreditation process administered by the National Council for University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA) evidences a structured and regulated system, oriented towards the continuous improvement of Higher Education Institutions and programs. This process is notable for its focus on transparency and collaboration, showing a significant shift from its initial implementation to a more integrative and supportive methodology.

Documentation Reception and Verification

The accreditation process begins when the Executive Secretariat of CONEAUPA receives the Self-Evaluation Reports and the Improvement Plan, along with a favorable report from

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the Technical Commission for Academic Development (CTDA) as per Article 7 of Law 52. If the documentation is incomplete, it is returned to the university with a deadline of up to 15 business days to complete it. This stage is crucial as it establishes the documentary base upon which all subsequent evaluations are performed, and the requirement for completeness ensures that the evaluation is based on comprehensive and verified information.

Selection and Preparation of Academic Peers

Once the Executive Secretariat of CONEAUPA verifies that the documentation is complete, the process of selecting academic peers begins, conducted within a 30-day working period. The selection process involves a detailed mechanism that ensures suitability and the necessary impartiality to carry out fair and objective evaluations. Peers are selected from a pool that includes national and international evaluators, thus ensuring a broad range of profiles and experience. Selection is made randomly for each specific case, which guarantees the impartiality of the process. Additionally, for each selected academic peer, an alternate is assigned to ensure continuity of the process in case any event prevents the participation of the main peer.

The system establishes a clear procedure for the recusal of peers by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), in case of a conflict of interest. This procedure maintains the integrity and transparency of the evaluation process, allowing HEIs to express concerns and request the substitution of a particular peer if a potential bias or conflict that could affect the objectivity of the evaluation is perceived.

Before the on-site visit, each academic peer prepares their individual preliminary report based on the documentation provided by the institution. This initial report is crucial for identifying key areas of interest and preparation for the visit. Subsequently, peers meet virtually to discuss and consolidate their findings for the consensus report.

Visit and Evaluation

The visit agenda is carefully planned and agreed upon with the university, considering the particularities and operational needs of the institution. This step reflects the rigor of the process and CONEAUPA's intention to ensure coherent evaluations.

During the accreditation visit, a technician from CONEAUPA plays a significant role as a liaison between the university and the academic peers. This technician, with extensive technical-academic knowledge about the evaluation matrices, ensures the process runs smoothly and that all parties are duly informed and coordinated. The presence of the technician facilitates communication, resolves doubts in real-time when necessary, and assists in the correct interpretation of accreditation standards. This support reinforces the rigor of the process and provides HEIs with greater security and clarity during the evaluation.

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Peers conduct detailed evaluations, interact with various stakeholder groups within the university, and verify on-site the information presented in the preliminary reports. The methodology applied by the peers includes interviews, facility visits, and document analysis, ensuring that the evaluation is thorough and accurately reflects the institutional reality.

After the visit, academic peers send their final report to CONEAUPA. If necessary, CONEAUPA may make observations on this report within the next 10 business days following its receipt. Once the final report is accepted by CONEAUPA, it is sent to the university for review and possible response.

CONEAUPA coordinates all logistical aspects for academic peers, covering transportation, food, lodging, and medical expense insurance for international evaluators, facilitating their complete dedication to the evaluation process. This meticulous management underscores CONEAUPA's commitment to an efficient and professional procedure. Similarly, for national peers from other cities, CONEAUPA provides similar logistical support.

Feedback and Decision Making

Once the university receives the final report, it has the opportunity to agree or respond, if necessary, within 5 business days. The ability to respond underscores the respect for the voice of HEIs and promotes a fair and balanced process. Final accreditation decisions are based on this consolidated and reviewed report, ensuring that all parties have had the opportunity to significantly contribute to the evaluation process.

Decisions on accreditation at CONEAUPA are based on the information provided by academic peers, supported by the evaluation rubric they have completed. This detailed rubric allows the Council to perform an objective and systematic assessment of the evaluated institution, ensuring that decisions are based on consistent and transparent criteria.

In the Council's deliberations, technicians who have participated in the evaluation process attend only if necessary to clarify doubts or provide additional information, ensuring that their intervention is timely and relevant. This contributes to maintaining the objectivity and accuracy of the process. It is important to note that any Council member who has participated as a peer in the evaluation of a particular institution abstains from voting to avoid conflicts of interest and maintain impartiality in decision-making. The Executive Secretary does not have voting rights, and the President of the Council only exercises this right when there is a tie in the voting.

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Audit Findings

Evaluation Procedures

CONEAUPA exhibits a structured legislative and methodological approach in managing accreditation processes, based on Law 52 of June 26, 2015. This law, which repealed the previous Law 30 of 2006, outlined a new framework for institutional and program accreditation emphasizing transparency, compliance, and continuous improvement. The audit analysis highlights the effectiveness with which CONEAUPA has adopted and implemented these legislative frameworks to manage accreditation procedures in a systematic, rigorous, and transparent manner.

CONEAUPA is responsible for developing general methodological guidelines for the system, providing a detailed guide for self-assessment, external evaluation, and accreditation. This is evident in the review of documents such as the Evaluation Model Fundamentals and the guides for institutional self-assessment, which not only clearly define the procedures but also the quality criteria and standards to be followed.

The audit verified the implementation and compliance with the three phases of accreditation detailed in the law, observing the interaction between self-evaluation, external evaluation, and accreditation decisions. It was noted that the guides and accreditation matrices provided by CONEAUPA facilitate this process, ensuring that each phase develops according to established standards and is recorded faithfully and transparently in resolutions published and accessible through its website and the Official Gazette.

The publication of guides, accreditation results, and evaluation matrices on the CONEAUPA portal meets transparency standards. This not only allows public knowledge but also strengthens confidence in the accreditation system, offering educational institutions and the general public clear and open access to crucial information.

The detailed procedure from the initial application to the delivery of certifications demonstrates effective management in compliance with current regulations. The audit recognizes CONEAUPA's diligence in keeping these processes clearly coordinated and efficient, which is fundamental for the proper functioning of the accreditation system.

Accreditation Criteria

The accreditation criteria established by CONEAUPA reflect a commitment to the rigor and adaptability necessary to address the diversity of Higher Education Institutions in Panama. According to Law 52 of 2015, these criteria emphasize fair and equitable treatment for all institutions, highlighting the system's ability to adapt to different types of institutions and teaching modalities.

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The evaluation matrices developed by CONEAUPA are fundamental to the evaluation process. They are designed to verify compliance with basic indicators, which are mandatory, and secondary, which are desirable, evaluated on a qualitative and quantitative scale ranging from "fully complies" (5) to "does not comply" (1). This scale allows a detailed assessment of the institutions, contributing to the objectivity and transparency of the accreditation process. The periodic review of these matrices by national and international experts ensures the relevance and timeliness of the criteria used.

Furthermore, the self-assessment and accreditation procedures detailed in Resolutions 8 and 10 of 2021 indicate a systematic effort by CONEAUPA to provide guidelines that direct the processes in participating institutions. These procedures are duly documented and aligned with internationally recommended practices, providing a solid foundation for institutional and program accreditation and renewal.

The inclusion of universities with specialized focuses in arts, religious identity, and social responsibility reflects CONEAUPA's ability to consider educational diversity within a uniform regulatory framework. This aspect highlights CONEAUPA's effectiveness in managing a balance between standardization of criteria and the flexibility necessary to encompass the heterogeneity of educational institutions.

Training and Selection of Evaluators

The selection and training of academic peers by CONEAUPA adhere to a defined and transparent set of criteria established in Resolution 12 of 2020. The requirements include holding a postgraduate degree, having a minimum of five years of experience in the university sector, and meeting ethical and independence criteria, among others. These guidelines ensure that the selected academic peers possess both the academic capability and the necessary experience to conduct impartial and professional evaluations.

CONEAUPA maintains an updated pool of academic peers through open calls, facilitating the inclusion of both national and international evaluators. This resource is crucial for the random designation of peers, conducted at CONEAUPA's offices with the participation of a member of the Council Plenum, reflecting a structured and systematic approach to selection.

Before participating in external evaluation processes, academic peers are trained, receiving detailed guides and participating in preparatory sessions to resolve doubts and unify criteria. This ensures uniformity and accuracy in the evaluation process. In 2021, the training was facilitated by RIACES in collaboration with CONEAUPA, reinforcing the integration of knowledge and practices at an international level.

After accreditation visits, a self-assessment process is implemented for academic peers, complemented by an evaluation of the performance of the evaluation commission's

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coordinator. Additionally, in case of objection, CONEAUPA has a mechanism that allows evaluated institutions to express their concerns about the performance of designated evaluative peers, thus ensuring the impartiality and transparency of the evaluation process. This aspect underscores CONEAUPA's commitment to the integrity of the process and demonstrates the transparency and effectiveness of its accreditation system.

Furthermore, all peers are formally informed about their selection and are sent a contract detailing their specific responsibilities. During on-site visits, collaboration is prioritized, and each visit is carefully planned, including meetings and interviews with various institutional stakeholders.

Support (IES and Evaluators)

CONEAUPA undertakes initiatives aimed at supporting both higher education institutions and evaluators involved in the accreditation process. These initiatives focus on the continuous improvement of self-assessment and accreditation processes through educational and formative activities.

For IES, CONEAUPA organizes courses, workshops, seminars, and other educational activities designed to strengthen knowledge and capabilities in self-assessment. These activities are geared towards improving internal processes and facilitating the proper preparation of self-assessment reports. Additionally, the agency conducts orientation visits and offers training focused on the fundamentals of the evaluation and accreditation model. These efforts seek to ensure that IES understand and can effectively apply the established criteria and processes.

Annually, CONEAUPA offers workshops that maintain a dynamic of exchange and application of regulations. These trainings include the distribution of support materials such as detailed guides and evaluation matrices, facilitating universities' understanding and application of the quality standards necessary for accreditation.

For evaluators, CONEAUPA provides regular training covering detailed aspects of the accreditation process and guidance on how to conduct external evaluations effectively. These training sessions are complemented by educational materials and practical guides that are continuously updated and distributed. Additionally, feedback sessions are conducted after each on-site visit to evaluate and improve the performance of evaluators.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, CONEAUPA adapted its training and support methods, implementing solutions with digital technologies to ensure the continuity of its services. This transition included conducting trainings and meetings virtually, ensuring that both IES and evaluators had the necessary support to maintain and ensure quality standards during the crisis.

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Areas of Strength

- **Robust Legislative Framework:** CONEAUPA operates under a clearly established legal framework that was updated and strengthened with Law 52 of 2015, which expanded the standards and accreditation processes for HEIs in Panama.
- **Process Development:** CONEAUPA has demonstrated a structured implementation of accreditation processes, applying an approach that ensures coherence, accuracy, and fairness. This systematized methodology not only emphasizes uniformity in the application of accreditation standards but is also grounded in current legislation, ensuring that each procedure is supported by legal norms, from the initial documentation reception to the final certification issuance. This rigor ensures consistency in the application of evaluation criteria, offering a reliable framework for the objective assessment of educational institutions in Panama.
- **Diversified and Dynamic Evaluation Matrices:** CONEAUPA has developed and refined specialized evaluation matrices that incorporate both mandatory and desirable indicators, classified on a detailed and objective scale. These matrices are designed to appropriately capture the quality and effectiveness of institutional functions, reflecting the specificities and missions of each educational institution. This approach allows for the adaptation of the evaluation process to the various needs and contexts of the institutions, thus promoting a fair and tailored assessment crucial for the internationalization of Panamanian educational institutions. The matrices, designed by experts and continuously reviewed according to international best practices, not only facilitate a detailed and precise analysis but also reflect CONEAUPA's commitment to continuous improvement and the adaptability of the accreditation system to international higher education standards.
- **Rigorous Training and Selection of Evaluators:** Evaluators are selected through a public call and receive training on the norms of the processes and the principles and scopes of CONEAUPA accreditation, ensuring high-quality and objective evaluations in the accreditation process. The existence of an ethics code for peers is evident.
- **Timeliness and Transparency in the Publication of Documents and Results:** CONEAUPA demonstrates a commitment to timeliness and transparency by openly and accessibly publishing all relevant documents, including guides, accreditation results, and evaluation matrices. This practice ensures that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the general community can access and verify these documents, facilitating accountability and fostering trust in the accreditation process.
- **Ongoing Support and Training for HEIs:** CONEAUPA regularly conducts workshops and seminars, providing educational resources that help HEIs understand and comprehend accreditation requirements, thereby improving institutions and their internal quality assurance processes.

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- **Integration of Institutional Diversity:** In recognition of the diversity of HEIs, CONEAUPA has implemented a process that respects the contextualization of each university, adapting processes and fostering an environment of respect and equity. The flexibility of the process, along with continuous technical support, reflects CONEAUPA's commitment to quality assurance, motivating universities to grow and improve continuously.
- **Integration and Awareness for Continuous Improvement:** The implementation of a culture of transformation in HEIs is one of the most significant contributions of CONEAUPA. Through a proactive approach with institutions and awareness towards continuous improvement, CONEAUPA has enabled universities to adopt a more systematic and proactive approach in their internal processes.
- **Proximity and Regulatory Compliance:** It was verified during interviews with stakeholders that CONEAUPA maintains close and constant availability with HEIs, facilitating an open and fluid dialogue that allows for effective coordination and compliance with established regulations. This aspect not only strengthens the institutional framework and the unified accreditation process but also ensures that all decisions and actions are based on respect and compliance with legal norms. CONEAUPA's international presence and its strategic vision to align with global standards have contributed to significant progress in the quality of education in Panama.

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Areas for Improvement

- **Unified Accreditation Documentation:** Although CONEAUPA has well-defined procedures, it could benefit from unifying the documentation related to the various phases of accreditation into a single text, facilitating its use by HEIs and technical staff.
- **Strengthening of Internal Quality Assurance:** An opportunity for improvement has been identified in the implementation of internal procedures for CONEAUPA.
- **Feedback:** There is an opportunity to improve the system for obtaining feedback on the performance of evaluators. Establishing procedures that collect opinions from both evaluators and the evaluated Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) would facilitate adjustments and improvements based on direct observations and constructive criticism of the accreditation process.

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Recommendations

- It is recommended to create a unified manual containing all documentation related to accreditation processes. This manual should be user-friendly and digitally available to ensure easy access and guarantee that all users, both internal and external, have a clear and comprehensive reference.

- Implement a system that allows for periodic review of its practices and processes.
- Complement the mechanism for obtaining feedback from HEIs and evaluators on the accreditation process. This system could include interactive digital platforms that facilitate continuous communication and provide real-time data on satisfaction and areas for improvement.

Conclusions

The evolution of the accreditation process under the management of the National Council for University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA) reflects substantial transformations in its approach and operability. Initially characterized by challenges and perceptions of stringent oversight, the process has matured into a model focused on evaluation and support within the perspective of continuous improvement.

Interviews with various stakeholders reveal that the most significant change has been CONEAUPA's shift toward a more facilitative and less punitive role, which has enhanced interactions with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This change has been realized through improvements in the accreditation matrix, designed with contributions from national and international experts, to optimize the clarity and applicability of the accreditation process. This revised matrix has not only enhanced the transparency of the process but also facilitated the internationalization of Panamanian HEIs, aligning them with global quality standards.

Continuous support for universities has been strengthened through a structured accompaniment process that includes training, workshops, and informational sessions covering all phases of the accreditation process. The development of a collaborative environment among HEIs is another notable achievement, allowing the exchange of experiences and effective practices that have contributed to raising the general standards of higher education in the country. The constant awareness and motivation by CONEAUPA are crucial in maintaining and increasing the active participation of universities in the accreditation process.

In terms of governance and management of the process, CONEAUPA has demonstrated strict compliance with current regulations, maintaining structured and documented processes that ensure objectivity and fairness in evaluating all institutions, regardless of their public or private nature. Respect for the contextualization of each university and the effective integration of diverse educational perspectives within the regulatory framework of CONEAUPA have been fundamental in adapting the accreditation process to the heterogeneity of the Panamanian educational system.

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Finally, the progress observed in the accreditation system under CONEAUPA's leadership highlights an inclusive, transparent, and collaborative approach that transcends improving educational quality, strongly advocating for accountability and social responsibility among Higher Education Institutions in Panama. This evolution has not only met the demands for higher educational standards but has also integrated institutions into a continuous and dynamic process that favors transparency and commitment to the educational community and society at large.

From the perspective of stakeholders, CONEAUPA has transformed accreditation processes into valuable tools for guidance and development, fostering a culture of continuous improvement that permeates all layers of the institutions. This approach has been instrumental in systematizing internal quality processes, providing universities with tools and knowledge that optimally prepare them for future accreditation cycles with greater confidence and effectiveness.

This renewed focus by CONEAUPA on managing educational quality reinforces the value of an accreditation system that not only evaluates but also educates and accompanies, ensuring that HEIs not only meet regulatory requirements but are also actively committed to the constant improvement of their educational offerings and social impact.

RIACES Auditors:

We, the undersigned, have conducted a comprehensive audit of the National Council for University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA). The scope of this audit encompassed the evaluation of accreditation and certification processes, in accordance with the procedures and regulations established by law, relevant norms, and applicable international standards.

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Name: Iván Ramos Calderón
Date: 06-21-24

Signature:

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Name: Olga Hernández Limón
Date: 06-21-24