



RED IBEROAMERICANA PARA EL ASEGURAMIENTO DE LA CALIDAD EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR

EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT BY THE RIACES PEER REVIEW COMMITTEE TO THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF UNIVERSITY EVALUATION AND ACCREDITATION OF PANAMA (CONEAUPA), PANAMA, MAY 11 AND 12, 2023

Presentation

The peer team designated by RIACES extends its gratitude to the officials of the National Council of University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA) for their exemplary organization of the visit. The substantial and logistical arrangements facilitated the execution of the visit and the external evaluation tasks in accordance with the mutually agreed schedule, within an environment characterized by cordiality, respect, and integrity. Additionally, the peer team appreciates the participation of the authorities, technical, and administrative staff of the agency, representatives from Higher Education Institutions, directors of accrediting agencies in collaboration with CONEAUPA, the agency's peer evaluators, and health program coordinators, whose contributions were instrumental in our external evaluators' duties.

The degree of mobilization by CONEAUPA was manifested through robust participation in the sessions with the evaluation team, comprising a significant number of academic authorities, scholars, agency directors, peer evaluators, and program coordinators from public and private institutions, countries of Central America, particularly from Panama—the country of the agency.

The RIACES Peer Review Committee, through its various meetings, acknowledged the positive impact of CONEAUPA's endeavors in the evaluation and accreditation of institutions and undergraduate programs, which are substantially influencing their development and enhancement.

The RIACES Evaluation Committee attests to the seriousness and punctuality with which the sessions arranged by RIACES were conducted and recognizes in CONEAUPA, its leadership, and technical staff, a profound commitment to the assigned tasks, the documentation presented as part of the process, requested by the Committee, and provided throughout the evaluation. The Committee wishes to emphasize that the agency's evaluation not only substantiates the categories and subcategories along with the corresponding evidence but also advances towards pinpointing strengths and opportunities for enhancement in each category.



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Methodology

The evaluation was framed by the manual for the self-assessment of agencies for evaluation and accreditation of quality in higher education aimed at identifying alignment following the Best Practices Guidelines (OBP) defined by the Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES) and is part of an exercise that combines both the evaluation of CONEAUPA and the analysis of the OBPs and support materials.

The Evaluation Committee interviewed various CONEAUPA units, as well as representatives of higher education institutions, collaborative agencies, peer evaluators, and coordinators of Health area programs, following the agenda attached to this document, which was consensually agreed upon between the Evaluation Committee and CONEAUPA.

The information presented by CONEAUPA, in relation to the categories of the RIACES OBP Manual, was evaluated by the Peer Committee appointed by RIACES and was assigned a qualitative rating, taking into account the following rating scale:

DOES NOT COMPLY	PARTIALLY COMPLIES	SATISFACTORILY COMPLIES	FULLY COMPLIES
There is no explicit statement, nor verifiable evidence, that allows concluding about the compliance with the standard.	There is an explicit statement, but only a few pieces of evidence are presented about some of the elements contained in the Best Practices Guidelines. The OBPs are followed only in some aspects evaluated, not in all.	The Agency satisfies the core elements of the Best Practices, and has the necessary evidence to demonstrate its compliance. The OBPs are complied with in most aspects evaluated.	The Agency outstandingly satisfies the elements of the Guidelines, has the necessary evidence to demonstrate compliance and sets an example of Best Practices in many aspects of its work. The OBPs are complied with in all aspects evaluated.

Finally, the members of the Evaluation Committee highlight the facilities of the platform designed and implemented by the RIACES support team, a tool that allowed advancing the evaluation online, based on the self-assessment uploaded to the platform by CONEAUPA, which is complete and well-documented.



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CATEGORY 1: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY

1.1 Establishment of the Agency

Panama is a country with a population of nearly 4 million inhabitants and has 42 universities, of which 28 are institutionally accredited, including the 5 state universities. The country has a National System for the Evaluation and Accreditation for the Improvement of Higher Education Quality, directed and managed by the National Council of University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA). CONEAUPA is the only official accreditation agency in the country formally established by Law 30 of July 20, 2006, published in the Official Gazette No. 25595 on July 25, 2006. Its background is in Decree Law 16 of July 11, 1963, "Regulating the establishment and operation of private universities in the Republic of Panama".

Law 52 of June 26, 2015 "Which creates the National System of Evaluation and Accreditation for the Improvement of Higher University Education Quality in Panama and repeals Law 30 of 2006", published in the Official Gazette No. 27813-B of June 30, 2015, establishes, like the now-repealed Law 30, that the accreditation of both public and private universities in Panama is mandatory.

The National Council of University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA) was created as an evaluative and accrediting agency representative of the different actors linked to the development of the country's university higher education and is formally recognized as the national agency.

Law 52 of 2015 was regulated by Executive Decree No. 539 of August 30, 2018, and subsequently, articles and numerals were added to it to improve the regulations. Due to the existing gap regarding universities that failed to achieve accreditation, as well as addressing other issues related to the accreditation process, Executive Decree No. 1295 of July 9, 2021, was approved. In order to have a single regulation, Executive Decrees 539 and 1295 were integrated and a new order was given to the articles through Resolved No. 723-AL of March 21, 2022, which approved the Single Text of Executive Decree No. 539 of August 30, 2018, which creates the National System of Evaluation and Accreditation for the improvement of the quality of Higher University Education in Panama.

The central government, through the Ministry of Education (MEDUCA), supports the processes of institutional accreditation and reaccreditation, of careers and programs of both public and private universities. An example of this is the Act of Commitment Signing to start the reaccreditation process of 23 universities in October 2021, an



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activity that was attended by the President of the Republic, S. E. Laurentino Cortizo Cohen.

Therefore, the criteria of the subcategory are fully met. The agency is legally established in Panama, has formal government recognition, and complies with the administrative and legal requirements in force in the jurisdiction in which it operates. Additionally, CONEAUPA is recognized within its jurisdiction as the agency responsible for the evaluation and accreditation of university higher education institutions. Therefore, it can be concluded that CONEAUPA is a legitimate and recognized accreditation agency in Panama.

The "National Council of University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA)" is duly established as a legal entity with moral standing, possesses an appropriate structure of ownership and governance, and is compliant with its obligations as stipulated by its founding documents and internal regulations.

In accordance with its bylaws, CONEAUPA is governed by two principal officers: the President and the Executive Secretary, who jointly bear the responsibility for leading the accrediting agency.

1.2. Mission and Purposes

The **mission** of CONEAUPA is *"To advance academic excellence in the substantive functions of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Panama through the accreditation of quality, the formulation of Public Policy proposals, research, and innovation within an environment respecting principles of environmental care, integrity, transparency, equity, and accountability to aid in combating poverty and promoting national development."*

The **vision** is *"to be acknowledged as the benchmark for best practices in educational quality assurance both nationally and internationally."* This vision has historically evolved since the regulatory inception for the creation of private universities in 1963, the approval of Law 30 of 2006, and Law 52 of 2015, which is the current legislation and has shown the need to adapt this legislation to meet new national demands and align with international trends.

Law 52 establishes the **principles** of the National System of Evaluation and Accreditation for the Enhancement of Higher University Education in Panama, including the continuous improvement of quality, respect for university autonomy, recognition of the diversity of university institutions, their various programs and teaching modalities, equitable and just treatment of higher education institutions,



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transparency in adherence to all ethical, moral, and legal norms governing higher education, and confidentiality in the management of information.

CONEAUPA's **objectives** are to promote and develop a culture of evaluation that ensures the quality of university higher education, to strengthen the National System of Evaluation and Accreditation, to encourage continuous improvement in the performance and quality of university institutions, and to certify the quality of institutions and programs through the accreditation process. Moreover, CONEAUPA aims to enhance the quality of university higher education and to facilitate articulation and mobility among different levels and modalities of the University Higher Education System.

As for the agency's policies and mechanisms, it is important to note that the Accreditation and Reaccreditation processes are mandatory and are supported by Resolutions, Agreements, and legal provisions of the Council, which must be rigorously adhered to once published in the official State publication, the Official Gazette.

Thanks to the implementation of established policies and mechanisms by CONEAUPA, a total of twenty-three (23) universities have been reaccredited, and six (6) universities have undergone Institutional Accreditation processes for the first time, with five achieving certification (Record I-2023 of March 29, 2023). The Resolutions for all accredited universities are published in the Official Gazette and on the CONEAUPA website.

The agency has educated both CONEAUPA staff and universities through workshops, diploma programs, and technical support visits.

CONEAUPA's actions are planned and executed under the leadership of the Executive Secretary based on compliance with the Annual Operational Plan (AOP), which is approved by the CONEAUPA Plenary and submitted to the Ministry of Education (Law 52 of June 26, 2015, Article 23, clauses 4 and 5). The AOP reflects the distribution of the budget and the significance of the actions related to the accreditation processes of the HEIs, as well as the training of peers, technicians, and the development and validation of matrices. The agency is governed by governmental provisions for the execution of the budget assigned through the Ministry of Education.

One of the agency's particularly significant initiatives is the Strategic Plan 2023-2030, which, with a long-term prospective vision, identified through participatory workshops, the demands and needs of the National System of Evaluation and



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Accreditation for the Enhancement of Higher University Education Quality, defining strategic axes and subsequent effects:

- 1 The norms and procedures of the evaluation and accreditation processes are updated and implemented in a coordinated, coherent, timely, and transparent manner.
- 2 CONEAUPA promotes and facilitates higher education quality through collaborative work of HEIs and their greater engagement with national and international organizations.
- 3 CONEAUPA, accredited and strengthened, autonomously, coordinatedly, effectively, and efficiently leads the National Evaluation System for the Enhancement of University Higher Education Quality in Panama. The Plan establishes strategic guidelines and priority products to achieve a strengthened and consolidated System that promotes continuous improvement in the performance and quality of HEIs in a relevant, articulated, and timely manner.

The agency relies on Resolutions to ensure quality in its processes and to comply with the guidelines for Higher Education in Panama. Its goal is to guide, accompany, and promote the educational institutionalization of universities, including specialized areas such as careers and programs.

Overall, CONEAUPA fulfills its objectives and upholds transparency in the application and adherence to the laws that govern the National System of Evaluation and Accreditation for the Enhancement of Higher University Education Quality; it has implemented effective policies and mechanisms for the accreditation and reaccreditation of universities, careers, and programs, as well as for organizing its activities. The university community's needs and requirements have been duly considered.

1.3 Ethical Commitment of the Agency

Law 52 emphasizes the importance of transparency in complying with ethical, moral, and legal norms regulating higher education. In this regard, the National Council of University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA) has established a Code of Ethics, Conduct, and Corporate Responsibility. Furthermore, public servants at CONEAUPA, as officials of the Ministry of Education, must comply with the Code of Ethics for Public Servants of the Republic of Panama. To ensure compliance with these norms, CONEAUPA officials have attended the Ethics Course for Public Servants.



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Additionally, prior to the start of the institutional reaccreditation processes in 2022, the technical staff signed a Confidentiality Agreement preventing the disclosure of information about the assigned processes.

In terms of technical assistance, the agency conducts orientation visits and workshops on evaluation and accreditation at universities, as mandated by law, aimed at those responsible for educational quality at all Higher Education Institutions. These workshops focus on the preparation of the Self-Study, the evidence supporting it, and the institutional improvement plans.

As part of the support provided to universities, the agency offers guidance and reviews specific aspects of the documents to ensure compliance with the standards approved by the CONEAUPA Plenary. The agency also provides technical assistance for institutions initiating their respective institutional processes concerning Academic Quality

In the case of the members comprising the Plenary Council of CONEAUPA, an Internal Regulation is in place that anticipates conflicts of interest and establishes the procedures to be followed. For instance, should an issue be presented that specifically concerns the universities representing either the private or public sector, the member will recuse themselves from the session until the matter is resolved. In such instances, the representative from that university is replaced by another representative.

Law 52 stipulates that CONEAUPA is composed of 11 ad honorem members, all closely linked to the development and transformation of university education in the Republic of Panama. These members include: the Minister of Education or their representative (who presides and has the right to speak and vote only to break ties), the Minister of Economy and Finance or their representative, the National Secretary of Science, Technology and Innovation or their representative, the President of the Commission for Education, Culture, and Sports of the National Assembly or their representative, the President of the Technical Commission for Academic Development or their representative, the Executive Secretary of the National Council of University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (with speaking rights only), two members from public universities or their representatives, two members from private universities or their representatives, a member from the National Council of Private Enterprise for a period not exceeding two years on a rotational basis, a member from the Organizations of Professionals of Panama elected among them for a period not exceeding two years and on a rotational basis, and a member of the National Education Council. Concerning this matter, there is an error in the number of members because both the public and private universities have two principal



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representatives each, and there is no National Education Council, thus there are thirteen members, not eleven. This observation, along with others concerning the content of Law 52, is recorded to be considered in its update.

The decisions of accreditation and institutional reaccreditation are based on the Decision-Making Guide which includes a table that allows for the determination of the validity of the accreditation according to the scores obtained in the basic and secondary indicators and the total sum of both. The same occurs with the accreditation of careers and programs.

The agency guarantees transparency in evaluative processes and has tools to prevent potential conflicts of interest. Among these, the Code of Ethics, Conduct and Corporate Responsibility of CONEAUPA, the agendas and agreements of the Council sessions, as well as the incident reports to resolve any incidents presented during the processes.

According to the resolutions approved by the Council, the requirements for requesting external evaluation are duly published in the Official Gazette and contemplate each phase of the process. At each stage of the process, the Agency interacts closely with each IES through the conduct of workshops, seminars, diploma courses, or even university visits to ensure timely support in each situation, thus complying with the estimated times for each process.

CONEAUPA operates in an environment of complete independence regarding each process, without any external pressure. Law 52 establishes the legal guidelines of the agency for decision-making regarding accreditation processes, which are mandatory in the Republic of Panama.

The existence of a systematically applied code of ethics and the clear separation of evaluation and technical assistance activities are indicators of a rigorous observance of ethical principles and impartiality in the process. The promotion of transparency and the systematic application of mechanisms to avoid conflicts of interest are important measures to ensure the integrity of the evaluative process.

The independence of CONEAUPA in its decisions and its commitment to a clear and objective definition of the characteristics that institutions, programs, or entities requesting external evaluation must meet, are indicators of high quality in the evaluation and accreditation work.

1.4 Governance, Organization and Resources



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The National Council of University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA) maintains an organic structure consistent with its mission and objectives, in which the Agency Council consists of eleven highly trained professionals committed to improving the quality of higher education in the country. The Council considers the actions and opinions of educational experts, legal advisors, and users to make decisions objectively and effectively.

CONEAUPA demonstrates its impartiality and independence in decision-making, as evidenced during the 2022 Reaccreditation process. The experiences shared by the rectors of reaccredited universities allowed for an appreciation of the maturity of the process and the agency. Moreover, Council members have diverse and independent profiles that enable them to make impartial decisions.

The selection process for the Executive Secretary and Deputy Secretary is conducted through a Public Call, where the most suitable professionals with extensive experience in higher education in Panama are chosen. The Organizational Chart of the National Council of University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama is tailored to its functions and supports the implementation of state policies that lead to the sustainable and systematic development of higher education.

CONEAUPA ensures efficient development through its Annual Management Plan, which is adapted to current and projected needs in university higher education.

The agency evaluates its management and plans its development according to the previously mentioned Annual Operational Plan (AOP). The outcomes of workshops for the development of the Strategic Plan support the effectiveness of the agency's planning and management.

CONEAUPA has professional staff, financial resources, and infrastructure that effectively ensure the various external evaluation processes. These processes are clearly established in the CONEAUPA's Organization and Job Description Manual (Resolution No.13 of August 14, 2020) and are updated to the organizational chart according to the agency's functions to meet the needs of HEIs.

CONEAUPA has communication and dissemination mechanisms to ensure timely issuance of information through its website, social networks (Instagram and Facebook), institutional email, and Public Inquiries email. In addition, virtual meetings and orientation or support visits to universities are conducted.

To ensure the quality of accreditation with other organizations, CONEAUPA establishes regulations with parameters and standards on which agreements for the recognition of accreditation certifications and the conduct of joint accreditations are



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developed, as well as the recognition of accreditations granted by other recognized organizations. This has resulted in CONEAUPA's recognition of the accreditation of six engineering programs at the Technological University of Panama and one at the Interamerican University of Panama awarded by the Central American Agency for Accreditation of Architecture and Engineering Programs (ACAAI), and by the Mexican Committee for the Accreditation of Agricultural Education (COMEAA), which accredited four agronomic science programs at the University of Panama.

Based on the foregoing, CONEAUPA meets the standards and requirements to effectively and efficiently perform external accreditation. Its governance structure is aligned with its mission and objectives, employing mechanisms to incorporate diverse perspectives. The decision-making body is independent and impartial, and CONEAUPA has a management plan in place to assess and enhance its performance.

It possesses the necessary resources and has clearly defined the functions and authorities of its internal bodies and administrative procedures. Furthermore, it has effective communication mechanisms with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and evaluators, ensuring the quality of services provided by other organizations when evaluation or accreditation processes are delegated to them.

1.5 Self-regulation and Continuous Improvement

CONEAUPA employs mechanisms to self-assess and adapt to international demands and environmental changes, such as surveys and the updating of regulations, as well as the review of matrices validated by experts and both public and private universities.

To gather and analyze information, CONEAUPA conducts surveys of participants in workshops and training seminars for accreditation or reaccreditation processes. This allows for the identification of the current situation, causes, consequences, and actions to be taken, and aims to capture the opinions of local experts and users of the services provided by the agency.

The preliminary actions to institutional accreditation or reaccreditation processes, as well as for programs and courses, are based on requirements, steps, and guidelines established by the agency. These include the Principles of the Institutional Accreditation Evaluation Model, the Decision-Making Guide, principles of evaluation models, process procedures, matrices, and calls for participation in evaluation processes, developed by the Executive Secretariat, Deputy Secretariat, and the



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Technical Commission for Evaluation and Accreditation of CONEAUPA, and approved by the Plenary Council.

The periodic self-assessment, which involves key stakeholders in the presentation of the Strategic Plan, allows the agency to establish plans and objectives to enhance its performance. In the case of CONEAUPA, it mandates that the agency must submit the necessary documentation to apply for accreditation to the Central American Accreditation Council (CCA) and any other international body of similar nature within a ten-year period. Additionally, the agency gathers information through instruments in each process. Although this law has been repealed and the current legislation does not contemplate the agency's accreditation, CONEAUPA commits to quality and excellence by seeking Good Practices certification with the Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES).

The Agency ensures the continuous improvement and updating of its staff, whereby the Executive Secretary proposes training plans in evaluation and accreditation of higher university education quality for the staff engaged in this process. In this regard, CONEAUPA personnel participate in workshops and diploma courses to stay updated on institutional Accreditation or Reaccreditation processes, for courses and programs, and meetings are held with universities to clarify points or review applicable standards, ensuring the continuous training of technical staff and thereby, their commitment to quality.

CONEAUPA is an organization committed to the continuous improvement of higher university education in the country. To achieve this objective, it develops rigorous criteria and procedures to evaluate the impact of its actions on the quality of higher education. One of the most important tools used by CONEAUPA to measure its impact is the application of surveys to external peers, as well as guiding universities on the development of instruments for institutional accreditation purposes. This information is used to feed the knowledge processes and make informed decisions about the quality of higher education in Panama.

The experience gained from previous processes demonstrates CONEAUPA's exceptional performance in certifying participating universities with excellence, thanks to the guidance and orientation visits of its technical team. In this context, CONEAUPA has met each of its objectives to improve the quality of higher university education in Panama through formal and transparent processes.

Identified as an area for improvement is the need to integrate the vast amount of existing regulations into a thematic manual that facilitates the understanding and application of institutional, course, and program processes, both for agency staff and



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for universities. This initiative would allow for active ownership of the contents and greater effectiveness in the implementation of processes, which in turn would contribute to strengthening the quality of higher university education in Panama.

Acknowledgments

- The RIACES Evaluators Committee acknowledges and appreciates the seriousness and responsibility with which CONEAUPA conducts its functions as an evaluation and accreditation agency.
- According to feedback received from rectors of reaccredited universities, directors of associations, international agency officials, and coordinators of health area programs, CONEAUPA is considered a cornerstone in enhancing the quality of higher education in Panama, not only due to the rigor of the process but also because of the agency's commitment to keeping guides and frameworks up to date.
- The Council operates independently and is decentralized, with financial, administrative, and regulatory autonomy, possessing its own assets and legal personality.
- CONEAUPA's commitment to the continuous improvement of its internal processes.
- The Agency ensures the ongoing enhancement and updating of its staff systematically.
- The agency guarantees transparency in evaluative processes and has tools to prevent potential conflicts of interest.
- CONEAUPA recently benefits from processes and procedures that guide the evaluation and accreditation of institutions in Panama. The results of the implementation of these processes and procedures are currently being analyzed, which are providing sufficient inputs to update and consolidate its evaluation instruments.
- Regarding the international accreditation of its Medicine and Engineering programs, the Agency delegates evaluation or accreditation processes to other bodies; it has clear, public, and effective criteria and procedures to ensure the quality of services provided by these bodies and applies them effectively. Currently, it is managing agreements with other agencies to seek international accreditation for programs in Administration and Graduate Studies, among others.

Recommendations



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- Review the composition of the Council with respect to representatives from both public and private universities.
- CONEAUPA benefits from processes and procedures that guide the evaluation and accreditation of institutions in Panama. To date, the results of these processes and procedures are being analyzed, which are generating sufficient inputs to update and consolidate its evaluation instruments. However, these self-assessment processes have not been developed, and it is recommended that mechanisms and opportunities be created to ensure broad participation of representatives from the national academic community. This is essential for updating the model and/or evaluation instruments to incorporate not only lessons learned at the national level but also the challenges, issues, and trends in higher education discussed on the international stage. The self-assessment or reflective processes achieved have been internal or with a limited number of representatives from the national academic community.
- It is crucial that the Council discuss and incorporate the implementation of international standards into its evaluation model as key elements of its commitments in the Strategic Plan 2023-2030.
- To continue ensuring the diversity of the various higher education institutions, their programs, and teaching modalities, it is necessary to keep revising the evaluation model so that in the short term it accommodates technical and technological institutions, indigenous universities, and academic offerings other than in-person.
- To ensure continuity and safeguard the achievements made by the agency in Panama, it is recommended that the technical team be expanded to meet the increasing demand for support to Panamanian universities.
- In line with the above, establish mechanisms at the central government level to stabilize the operational technical team of CONEAUPA to handle the growing national demand for accreditations and reaccreditations, and international participation in update plans and actions.
- Initiate reflection sessions to identify the level of adjustment that can be made from the implementation of the evaluation instruments (matrices and rubrics) to progress towards a second version, incorporating recommendations from the agency's technicians, and the university teams.
- To preserve the knowledge and experience accumulated, it is recommended to start writing manuals for the specific functions of each technician, particularly referring to each of the stages, processes, and procedures of the agency. This exercise will also allow for the study of workload to determine if the number of technical staff is sufficient for the current tasks of the agency or if an increase is necessary and by how much.



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- In the processes of self-regulation and continuous improvement, it is advisable to incorporate analyses related to the efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness of its own policies, mechanisms, strategies, and resources (physical, technological, financial, and human) in relation to the fulfillment of its strategic commitments stated in the mission, vision, and institutional principles.
- To strengthen the current CONEAUPA evaluation model, consider the need to start constructing evaluation instruments that allow for accrediting, in the short to medium term, the accreditations of national careers and programs that are currently carried out in agreement with other international agencies.

CATEGORY 1: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY	
Subcategory	Degree of compliance with the OPB.
1.1 Establishment of the Agency	Fully complies
1.2. Mission and Purposes	Fully complies
1.3 Ethical Commitment of the Agency	Fully complies
1.4 Governance, Organization and Resources	Satisfactorily complies
1.5 Self-regulation and Continuous Improvement	Fully complies

In summary, based on the analysis of the indicated subcategories, the Evaluation Committee concludes that CONEAUPA FULLY COMPLIES with the guidelines contained in Category 1: Quality Assurance Agency; and there are no non-compliances in the essential subcategories: 1.2, 1.3.



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CATEGORY 2: THE AGENCY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

2.1. Promotion of Responsible Autonomy in Higher Education

The National System of Evaluation and Accreditation for the Enhancement of Higher University Education Quality in Panama establishes principles including respect for university autonomy, recognition of the diversity of university institutions and their various programs and teaching modalities; fair and equitable treatment of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), transparency in compliance with all ethical, moral, and legal norms regulating higher education, and confidentiality in the management of information, among others.

CONEAUPA, as the administrator of this system, embodies these principles in its interactions with HEIs and acknowledges their primary responsibility for quality assurance while respecting their autonomy, identity, and integrity, taking into account institutional diversity and treating each fairly and equitably.

Through transparent, ethical work in accordance with the legal norms that regulate Higher Education in Panama, CONEAUPA has promoted compliance with the responsibility that universities have to maintain quality assurance.

As a regulatory agency, it promotes continuous improvement in the performance and quality of HEIs, as evidenced in the document "Foundations of the Model for Evaluation with Purposes of Institutional Accreditation in Panama", as well as in the "Matrix for Institutional Evaluation and Accreditation in Panama", and the "Matrix for Institutional Reaccreditation in Panama", based on the agency's quality standards and as mechanisms for continuous improvement, allowing for their constant programming and development.

Both the accreditation matrix and the institutional reaccreditation matrix, as well as the matrix for academic programs, establish mechanisms to demonstrate quality assurance by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The institutional evaluation and accreditation matrix, in the respective sections, proposes strategic actions aimed at internal quality assurance. The standard specifies that the university must have an administrative unit to ensure quality improvement, with a policy for internal quality assurance, in addition to strategic actions aimed at continuous improvement.

Among the minimal evidence that the seven universities undergoing the accreditation process for the first time were required to present include a policy for internal quality assurance; an administrative unit for quality assurance clearly



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depicted in the organizational chart and procedural manuals for monitoring and controlling internal quality assurance, among others. The institutional reaccreditation matrix outlines strategic actions aimed at continuous improvement, and the standard stipulates that the university must have a functional structure for ensuring the quality of institutional management, with mechanisms systematically applied across all academic and administrative units, in accordance with established guidelines.

In the Matrix of Evaluation and Accreditation of Health Sciences programs, there is a Component of Quality and Continuous Improvement of the program; subcomponent Evaluation Mechanisms and the Quality Criterion is the existence of quality assurance mechanisms related to admission, teaching-learning processes, evaluation, and academic performance applied and in correspondence with the graduation profile while the standard demands that the university demonstrate that it has an ongoing program oriented towards quality and improvement of the program. In this context and in response to Quality Assurance, universities have adopted three primary instruments: the Institutional Development Plan (PDI), the Annual Operational Plan (POA), and the Institutional Educational Model. Through Self-Evaluation Reports, universities disclose their achievements and the critical aspects of their operations, and with the Adjusted Institutional Improvement Plan (PMIA), they demonstrate their progress in each accreditation process and annual follow-up, as well as with the Program Improvement Plan (PMC).

CONEAUPA aims to promote a culture of evaluation and quality in higher education institutions in Panama. In the exercise of its functions, it develops the general conceptual and methodological guidelines of the National System of Evaluation and Accreditation for the Improvement of Higher University Education Quality in Panama; provides technical advice, support, and training to HEIs, and plans and executes training programs in evaluation, accreditation, and quality management of higher education directed at those responsible for these processes, according to the monitoring conducted on universities, emphasizing areas that need to be reinforced. In line with its mission and vision, CONEAUPA has promoted an equitable and fair approach to improving the quality of higher education in Panama, enabling universities to demonstrate their commitment to continuous improvement and quality assurance.

2.2. Support Actions and Advisory to Self-Assessment Processes

CONEAUPA is responsible for evaluating and accrediting higher education institutions in Panama. To enhance university processes, it organizes courses, workshops, seminars, and other activities that offer improvement opportunities and facilitate the development of self-assessment processes for each university's



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Technical Evaluation Units (UTES). The agency also conducts orientation visits requested by universities and provides training during the self-assessment processes to reinforce the conceptual mastery of the Evaluation and Accreditation Model Foundations, the institutional accreditation matrix, reaccreditation, career, and the regulations that accompany the development of the process.

Annually, CONEAUPA organizes training workshops to maintain the dynamics of exchange and application of regulations in the delivery of self-assessment reports by universities and consistently addresses inquiries by phone, email, and in-person as required by each HEI. Additionally, training sessions are recorded and shared with universities so they can be viewed as often as needed and used in internal training to ensure greater contact, involvement, and development of an institutional culture linked to the quality assurance process of higher education.

University teams participating in various trainings fill out a participation form to ensure they are involved in each process, along with an attendance list to continue training actions as a criterion for collaboratively building knowledge and expanding mastery over the regulations and their implementation. The aforementioned actions demonstrate the agency's commitment to supporting the development of self-assessment processes, which are fundamental to ensuring the quality of higher university education.

CONEAUPA provides universities with support materials for the development of their self-evaluation reports, such as clear and comprehensible guides to the process, for instance, the Guide for Institutional Self-Evaluation, which includes components, subcomponents, criteria, indicators, and an evidence verification guide. These materials are reviewed, approved, and published by the agency to strengthen the process. In adherence to the principle of Transparency, the agency has published the Guide for Decision-Making on Institutional Accreditation.

Providing guidance and clear tools for the development of self-assessment processes, as CONEAUPA does, helps universities improve the quality of education they offer. The fact that these materials are reviewed, approved, and published by the agency shows the commitment and seriousness with which processes are planned, conducted, and evaluated. The publication of the Guide for Decision Making on Institutional Accreditation also demonstrates CONEAUPA's transparency in its work and its commitment to the continuous improvement of higher university education in Panama. In general, these practices significantly contribute to the strengthening and development of higher education institutions in the country.



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In response to COVID-19, declared a pandemic in Panama on March 13, 2020, and with the aim of maintaining the continuity of actions in the face of the global health emergency, CONEAUPA approved actions to address Quality Assurance processes in crisis situations so that the relationship with universities would remain and they would feel supported, specifically in terms of follow-up to the Adjusted Institutional Improvement Plans (PMIA) and career plans (PMCA) and support in the development of processes. Externally, the agency offered training to external evaluator peers and staff responsible for internal quality assurance, in addition to incorporating technological mechanisms in external evaluation visits.

In 2020, CONEAUPA continued its work through the conduct of virtual meetings of the Council's Plenary Assembly, prioritizing activities focused on the approval and official publication of guides and regulations such as those related to the Recognition of Accreditation Certifications and for joint accreditations of programs and courses, the Guide for this recognition, as well as the Institutional Evaluation and Reaccreditation Matrix and the Procedure for reporting incidents or events that have a direct or indirect impact on the normal progress of activities and/or processes. During the same year, CONEAUPA developed a self-assessment management diagnostic and conducted virtual meetings to address the requirements of universities. Furthermore, a national call was made to carry out studies on quality assurance and the accreditation processes of higher education institutions.

During the 2020-2021 period, biennial visits were scheduled to universities, technical orientation meetings were held with the committees responsible for the programs, and documentation was received for entry into the accreditation and reaccreditation processes in response to the Call for universities participating for the first time in an evaluation process for institutional accreditation and for universities that did not have institutional accreditation certification issued by CONEAUPA. In the latter case, it was possible to address the legal vacuum concerning the status of universities that, having undergone the process, did not achieve accreditation. Executive Decree 1295 establishes a one-year period for these universities to reapply, thereby continuing the process of quality assurance for these institutions.

As evidenced, CONEAUPA provides support during quality assurance processes, maintaining constant communication with universities and strengthening their capacities for self-assessment and continuous improvement. Moreover, guidance is provided, progress in the development of their Adjusted Institutional Improvement Plan (PMIA) and career plan is established, and the exchange of good practices is promoted to define strategies that facilitate continuous improvement in the quality of higher university education, as evidenced in the Guide for Promoting a Culture of



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Self-Assessment through the Development of the Institutional Improvement Plan of the Universities of Panama.

The information provided by institutions undergoing self-assessment and institutional accreditation, as well as for specific programs or courses, is confidential and governed by the Code of Ethical Conduct and Corporate Responsibility, which must be strictly adhered to by CONEAUPA staff, as well as by the members of the Plenary Council. Prior to the commencement of the accreditation processes, all technical staff of CONEAUPA signed a confidentiality agreement which precluded them from sharing information about the universities assigned for peer support, the management of communication, and the documents that comprised the administrative file of each Higher Education Institution.

On a broader scale, public servants of the central government, autonomous and semi-autonomous entities, and local governments are obliged to comply with the Uniform Code of Ethics for Public Servants and to ensure understanding and application of the norm, they had to take the Ethics for Public Servants course which is considered an *"effective tool for the application of preventive measures within the institutional system to strengthen instructions to staff that ensure the proper understanding of their responsibilities and the ethical norms governing their activities,"* which was taught by the virtual academy of the National Authority for Transparency and Access to Information (ANTAI).

The importance of training and the provision of support materials for the development of self-assessment processes is highlighted, demonstrating CONEAUPA's commitment to contributing to the strengthening and development of higher university education institutions in the country. Furthermore, CONEAUPA's transparency in its work is noteworthy, demonstrated in the publication of guides and regulations and in the attention to quality assurance processes during the pandemic.

2.3. Definition of Criteria and Procedures for External Evaluation

The statement of principles of the National System of Evaluation and Accreditation for University Education in Panama, managed by CONEAUPA, acknowledges the diversity of university institutions and their various programs and teaching modalities, as well as the fair and equitable treatment of HEIs. CONEAUPA is the national agency responsible for the accreditation process of HEIs, both public and private, and it establishes the guidelines governing the context and scope of institutional, program, and career accreditation processes.



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In the development of the matrices, special care has been taken to ensure that they provide sufficient openness for HEIs to respond to mandatory basic indicators and desirable secondary indicators, with a valuation scale ranging from fully complies (5) to does not comply (1), on both qualitative and quantitative scales that support decision-making.

For the self-evaluation process, the relevant regulations for the process to be developed (institutional, careers, programs) are provided, along with the corresponding matrix, which integrates four factors to be evaluated. This matrix arises from the call of national and international academics who review the criteria in each process, allowing for the updating of the instruments that will later be used for external evaluation at the universities. All this is contemplated in the Procedure for the Institutional Accreditation Process, as well as the procedure for the Institutional Reaccreditation Process, Accreditation and Reaccreditation of careers, External Evaluation Process, and Self-Evaluation Process.

Panama is recognized as the "bridge of the world, heart of the universe" and as a "melting pot," phrases that allude to cultural and religious diversity, tolerance, and acceptance of each person's and institution's identity, which also covers the diversity of HEIs that were accredited in 2022, with the established matrix. For example, Ganexa University, focused on the cultural and artistic part; Midrashá Jorev University, focused on strengthening Jewish identity and training professional women within its religious community outside of Israel; Hosanna University, with Christian values and principles that voluntarily entered the accreditation process; and Our Lady of Carmen University, which was created to provide opportunities for socially at-risk communities, all equally valued within a national regulatory framework where accreditation is mandatory.

From Law 52 of 2015 and its regulations in 2018, CONEAUPA has developed a systematic process of reviewing the regulations that support the various actions, considering the experience of accreditation agencies from other countries such as Colombia, Paraguay, Ecuador, Mexico, Costa Rica, as well as the national reality and the universities' experience in the processes. Additionally, consultations were made with university experts and centers such as CINDA, reviewing the models of agencies from these countries, which allowed for establishing uniform criteria regarding evaluation, such as the phases of the processes: Self-evaluation, external evaluation by academic peers, and accreditation.

All planning actions for the processes, whether for institutional accreditation or reaccreditation, for careers, or programs, require a series of actions to be in line with the norms and the reality of HEIs in Panama. In this regard, the agency has



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developed a series of requirements, steps, or guidelines that include the creation of evaluation models, decision-making guides, evaluation model foundations, process procedures, matrices, and calls for entry into the respective evaluation processes for accreditation or reaccreditation. All these documents have been developed by the Technical Commission for Evaluation and Accreditation of CONEAUPA and approved by the Plenary Council.

CONEAUPA has implemented an institutional evaluation model focused on the continuous improvement of quality processes. This model concentrates on mitigating weaknesses identified in the self-assessment processes, which are considered areas for potential enhancement and must align with established regulations. For external evaluation, a group of specialists known as external academic peers is involved, consisting of two national evaluators and one international evaluator. They are responsible for verifying the self-assessment report, the institutional improvement plan, and the internal conditions of the institution, a process that complies with current standards.

That the matrix used by the selected evaluators for external evaluation has been reviewed by CONEAUPA, together with the stakeholders involved in the evaluations of HEIs, to ensure its relevance and meet the system's needs.

The technical staff of CONEAUPA had the opportunity to become acquainted with the models and instruments used in other countries. This knowledge and the contacts with other agencies were utilized in the design of the initial Accreditation Matrix employed in the first institutional call in 2012.

In consideration of national experience and in response to consultations with universities, a new accreditation matrix was prepared for the reaccreditation process of 23 universities that participated in the initial process (2012) and for the accreditation of new universities. This matrix was subjected to international experts and national universities for validation at both the official (UTP) and private (Euroamericana) levels.

Similarly, national specialists have been consulted for the review of the matrix for careers in the areas of Health Sciences, Education, Social Sciences.

CONEAUPA enriches itself with the contributions of international and national experts with the aim of adjusting both its regulations and its instruments. Currently, with a prospective vision, a search for information and experiences is being conducted to design a third matrix aimed at evaluating the impact of HEIs, with fewer



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indicators and a credential of excellence, a task to be developed in the immediate future.

2.4. Reconsideration and Appeal Mechanisms

It is important to note that CONEAUPA has mechanisms for dispute resolution, which ensures efficiency in the development of its processes. Universities have appropriate options for handling incidents that may arise during the course of activities or processes.

The Agency pays special attention to the development of a Quality Management System that includes the management of incident reports such as complaints, claims, and non-conformities, which must be addressed promptly and may have a direct or indirect relationship with the normal course of the activities or processes being undertaken.

Should an incident be detected, it must be recorded on the form provided by the agency and reported by the process manager. Within the form, one or several incidents can be marked, and a brief description must be provided that includes all relevant information for analysis. Subsequently, the corrective action approved by authorized persons, such as the Executive Secretary, the Deputy Secretary, and the Administrator, will be implemented.

A case occurred with a new member of the CONEAUPA Plenum who, unfamiliar with the regulations, made public the reaccreditation results of the first universities, causing considerable discomfort among the HEIs. The Executive Secretary personally spoke with the involved individual, and a note was prepared and sent to all members of the Plenum.

Authorized individuals to approve corrective actions include the Executive Secretary, Deputy Secretary, Administration Manager, Technical Staff, Records Manager, Information and Technology Manager.

Additionally, CONEAUPA has an email designated as "Public Inquiries coneupa@coneupa.edu.pa," to which students, teachers, national and international university institutions write requesting information or lodging complaints about various situations. It is frequently checked, and complaints, claims, and requests are forwarded to the Technical Commission for Academic Development (CTDA), to the HEIs themselves, while others are handled directly by CONEAUPA so that users receive prompt responses or the guidance they request.



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In the context of incident management, if a university believes that an incorrect procedure has been carried out, the Rector has the authority to issue a corresponding written complaint to the Council, thus ensuring the impartiality of the process and avoiding potential conflicts of interest.

As part of the accreditation processes, Rectors of HEIs receive the resumes of the external academic peers selected for the on-site visit and have the possibility to challenge them within a maximum of five days, thus anticipating potential conflicts.

The anticipation of conflicts of interest extends to external peers, prohibiting members of the external peer team, their relatives up to the fourth degree of consanguinity and second degree of affinity, from belonging to the evaluated university institution. Additionally, the Plenary Council has an Internal Regulation that establishes prohibitions and conflicts of interest. For instance, when an issue concerning the university represented by a council member is to be discussed, this member must withdraw from the session, and this is duly recorded in the minutes. Such was the case during the presentation of the academic peer evaluation for the accreditation of public and private universities (2022), where the representatives yielded their place to another representative while the presentation was made, deliberations occurred, and a decision was taken.

Additionally, the Code of Ethical Conduct and Corporate Responsibility of CONEAUPA, elaborates on the Impartiality of the CONEAUPA staff, including members of the Plenum.

2.5. Publication of Accreditation Decisions

One of the functions of CONEAUPA is to *"Publicly issue accreditation certifications for institutions, programs, and courses that meet the established quality standards"*.

In fulfillment of this function, once the on-site visit processes are completed, the Executive Secretary of CONEAUPA presents to the Plenary of the Council the results of the evaluation carried out by external academic peers based on the Decision-Making Guide, which forms the basis for the granting of accreditation certification for 4, 5, or 6 years to the HEIs. Subsequently, the agency publishes the Resolutions with their decisions in the Official Gazette. Similarly, CONEAUPA is required to publish the list of non-accredited universities on its website, after its publication in the Official Gazette.

The agency ensures the fidelity and validity of the information contained on its website, which allows access to all state publications that the law mandates to be



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disclosed through this medium. In this way, the validity of the normative and regulatory acts is certified.

The clarity of the guidelines for processes aligned with legal regulations gives validity and legitimacy to the results, which are recognized and valued both socially within the country and academically outside of Panama, leaving no doubt about the transparency of its decisions.

Acknowledgments

- With the updating of the evaluation instruments and the support provided to universities, it is evident that universities have made significant progress in establishing a culture of quality autonomously and responsibly, based on the principles of trust and continuous improvement.
- CONEAUPA, through the processes of preparation, self-evaluation, and follow-up, has significantly stimulated a culture of continuous improvement in Panamanian universities.
- The support and advisory actions exercised by CONEAUPA in the universities' self-evaluation processes are clearly recognized as a Best Practice, not only by the academic system of Panama but also by peer evaluators.
- The guidance and monitoring of improvement plans for accredited universities and programs are considered another Best Practice of the agency.
- CONEAUPA has a reference framework in which the aspects related to evaluation for accreditation and reaccreditation purposes are clearly defined.
- The continuous updating of accreditation guidelines according to national frameworks and international benchmarks from other accrediting agencies.
- The publication of accreditation decisions is disclosed on the CONEAUPA website for the information of the Panamanian community, which is recognized as a Best Practice.

Recommendations

- In order to advance the consolidation of a culture of continuous improvement in Panamanian universities with international standards, it is recommended to incorporate international standards into the evaluation model to promote and recognize the quality of higher education in aspects related to research and virtual delivery modes. Additionally, among the international standards to be considered in the evaluation model for Panama, consider including achievement indicators (Learning Outcomes) to assess the degree of

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compliance achieved at the end of the training process in relation to the graduate profile declared by the evaluated academic programs.

- Progress towards the possibility of evaluating the quality of training for courses and programs, as well as other institutions besides universities, which are also part of the educational offering in Panama at the level of technical and technological training, using proprietary instruments.

CATEGORY 2: THE AGENCY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS	
Subcategory	Degree of compliance with the OPB.
2.1. Promotion of Responsible Autonomy in Higher Education	Fully complies
2.2. Support Actions and Advisory to Self-Assessment Processes	Fully complies
2.3. Definition of Criteria and Procedures for External Evaluation	Fully complies
2.4. Reconsideration and Appeal Mechanisms	Fully complies
2.5. Publication of Accreditation Decisions	Fully complies

In summary, considering the analysis of the indicated subcategories, the team of peer evaluators concludes that CONEAUPA FULLY COMPLIES with the guidelines contained in Category 2: The agency's relationship with higher education institutions, and there are no non-compliances in the essential categories: 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3.



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CATEGORY 3: PROCESSES ASSOCIATED WITH EVALUATION

3.1. Documentation Required for Evaluation Processes

The agency has developed manuals, guides, matrices, and rubrics required for the stages of self-assessment, external evaluation, and accreditation, which are published on the organization's website as well as in the Official Gazette. The rules leading to the accreditation decision are transparent and public.

However, it is noted that the documentation on self-assessment and therefore external evaluation can be improved for institutions, courses, and programs, particularly in terms of incorporating or refining the measurement of learning outcomes, the assessment of achievement and impact of research outcomes in Higher Education Institutions that are universities, among other aspects demanded by the trends, challenges, and demands of Higher Education. This improvement would enable the recognition of the quality of education offered by universities in their various modalities: face-to-face, virtual, distance, and their different combinations.

3.2 External Evaluation

CONEAUPA maintains a Peer Review Bank of professionals interested in participating in the accreditation processes. To join, one must complete a form that serves as a reference for the selection of peers. In the second process initiated in 2021, the peers were trained by RIACES in collaboration with CONEAUPA.

Peers are grouped according to their training and experience, and those who will participate in the on-site visit commissions are selected randomly. This selection takes place at CONEAUPA's offices, with the participation of a member of the Council Plenum designated for this purpose. The selection record includes the list of chosen academic peers, along with an alternate for each commission in case a replacement is necessary.

Once selected, peers are notified that they have been chosen and are sent a contract specifying their responsibilities. A national peer leads each peer commission. Each peer has a designated time to prepare their individual report, after which a meeting convened by the Agency takes place to prepare an integrated report.

As part of their duties, peers agree on the questions they will ask and the aspects they will focus on during the on-site visit. If necessary, they may request additional information from the self-evaluation or the accompanying evidence. The Agency has



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an agenda format in which both the peers and the university agree on the on-site visit schedule, which includes meetings and interviews with students, faculty, authorities, administrative staff, graduates, and employers.

As observed in the agenda that is part of the administrative file for each university's process, the peers conduct an on-site visit and contrast the information received with what they find. The indicators verified to check compliance are in factor 4 of the institutional and career evaluation matrix, which refers to infrastructure. However, this is also a cross-sectional aspect evaluated during the on-site visit.

As part of the process monitoring, CONEAUPA has established an incident reporting procedure for situations that affect the smooth running of the process. In the process conducted, there were no incident reports from the universities.

It is important to highlight the role of the technical staff assigned to each university's process to ensure that it is carried out with the greatest objectivity and efficiency. This staff is responsible for keeping the Executive Secretary informed of any situations that may arise that contravene the process's development, but also acts as a liaison between the peers, the university, and CONEAUPA.

It is worth mentioning that peers fill out an evaluation survey of the Agency, a self-evaluation of their performance, and an evaluation of the commission coordinator. In addition to this, the technician assigned to the university for the process development provides an oral report and, in case of incidents, a written report.

The National System of Evaluation and Accreditation for the Improvement of Higher University Education Quality in Panama establishes as one of its principles the recognition of the diversity of university institutions, as well as their different programs and teaching modalities, and treats each of them fairly and equitably.

The matrices are designed so that each university can evidence its functions and programs according to its mission and objectives. For example, there are universities with religious orientations such as Midrashá Jorev (Jewish), Hosanna University (Evangelical), and Our Lady of Carmen University (Catholic), as well as in specific fields like Ganexa University of Art or the University of Distance Education of Panama (UNADP) and the University of Certified Public Accountants (UNESPA). All have presented their self-evaluations and improvement plans in response to the corresponding matrix, whether for accreditation or reaccreditation, demonstrating the objectivity of the matrix and its development prioritizing aspects that allow for evidence while also characterizing each university institution's unique features and identity.



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Both the institutional accreditation and reaccreditation matrices, as well as the program matrices, pay special attention to learning processes and their evaluation through a variety of techniques and tools from the beginning to the end of the student's education. For instance, in the institutional accreditation matrix, Factor 2. Academic Project, component 4. Academic Foundations, according to the teaching-learning modality; subcomponent 8. Teaching and Learning Strategies; indicator 32: Record of the evaluation of prior and acquired learning by students per period and modality, requires that the HEI minimally document the following 4 evidences from the Verification Guide: 1. Guidelines to guide the application of diagnostic, formative, and academic knowledge tests for students of all modalities; 2. Regulations that govern the process of diagnostic, formative, and summative evaluation of student learning; 3. Analysis of its application according to career, programs, and modality; and 4. Report of corrective actions taken from the analysis of the results of the statistics of repetition, lag, dropout, and abandonment of careers and programs, according to modality.

Specifically, indicator 45 of the evaluation matrix for Health Sciences careers states: Policies for the evaluation of learning and its standard establishes that the career must have Learning Evaluation Policies that integrate the cognitive, skill, dexterity, attitudinal or value, or competence areas, according to the defined professional profile.

The minimum verification guide requires presenting:

1. Learning evaluation policies
2. Mechanisms for the dissemination of the evaluation of learning
3. Annual report evidencing that at least 90% of the faculty are aware of the learning evaluation policies.

The Agency pays special attention to the evaluation of learning and collaborates with the Technical Commission for Academic Development, responsible for the oversight of universities, in the drafting and approval of the rules related to the presentation of the curricular design of careers and programs presented by private HEIs. These rules are also applied by public universities due to their responsibility in overseeing the offerings of private universities.

Faculty evaluation is an essential element to ensure the quality of student training. The Institutional Reaccreditation Matrix establishes in Factor 3, University Community, Component 11, Faculty, Subcomponent 20, Suitability and Competencies, Indicator 77, that institutions must have updated records of faculty evaluation mechanisms and their results at all sites, levels, and modalities. The



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minimum verification includes: 1) updated and valid mechanisms to evaluate faculty performance, 2) record of results, 3) training programs based on the results, 4) record of decisions, and 5) action plans for improvement.

For Health Sciences careers, Indicator 92 stipulates that universities must have a system for evaluating teaching performance. The minimum verification guidelines include: 1) institutional policies regarding teaching staff, 2) instruments for evaluating teaching performance, 3) a plan for disseminating policies, 4) an annual report on performance evaluation, and 5) an annual report on the analysis of results and action plans.

In conclusion, the evaluation of the teaching staff is a priority and forms part of the quality assurance system for the educational offerings in each modality.

The Institutional Evaluation and Accreditation Matrix underscores the importance of a self-assessment culture to enhance quality, as evidenced in Factor 1: Institutional Project, Component 3: Financial Management; Subcomponent 5: Control and Forecasts: Indicator 20. This indicator requires that the HEI present documents demonstrating the budget allocation and execution for the past three years, with percentages allocated to the university's core functions, such as teaching, research and innovation, outreach, and administration. Thus, it demonstrates the role of planning in the realization of the university's core functions by each institution.

In the accreditation matrix for Health Sciences careers, it is found in Factor 1. Institutional context of the career; Component 1. Organizational structure of the career; subcomponent 1. Organization; indicator 1. Functionality of the organizational structure for the management of the career according to its needs and those of the institution. This indicator establishes that the career must have an operational organizational structure and a document showing the correspondence of academic development planning with teaching, research, extension, and linkage with society. Additionally, it must have a Career Development Plan that identifies its needs and a mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the results obtained. These elements clearly evidence the forecasting function at the institutional and career level, which responds to quality assurance.

In the accreditation matrix, the subcomponent of Quality Assurance and indicator 10 establish the importance of administrative procedures to promote internal quality assurance of the various processes. The standard establishes that the university must execute self-evaluation processes that promote the university community's reflection to improve quality.



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In summary, the institutional and career evaluation and accreditation matrices emphasize the importance of self-evaluation as a tool to improve quality in each modality.

The evaluation matrices demonstrate their effectiveness by accommodating institutional diversity and evidencing the compliance with the mission, vision, values, and policies of the institutions, without being an obstacle to their development. In this regard, the self-evaluation of various universities such as Midrashá Jorev, Hosanna University, Our Lady of Carmen University, Ganexa University of Art, University of Distance Education of Panama (UNADP), and University of Certified Public Accountants (UNESPA), who have presented their improvement plans in response to the corresponding matrices, whether for accreditation or reaccreditation, is highlighted.

The Agency provides a suite of tools to guide HEIs in designing an Improvement Plan, which includes the Guide for Presenting Compliance with the Adjusted Institutional Improvement Plan (PMIA) and the Guide to Promoting a Culture of Self-Assessment through the Development of an Institutional Improvement Plan (Resolution No. 4 of May 27, 2021). The regulations also stipulate the annual submission of the PMIA Development Status Report by the universities, and a mid-term accreditation validity progress verification visit is conducted.

Furthermore, formats have been approved for the Verification Report on the Progress of the Adjusted Career Improvement Plan (PMCA) and a Guide for the Presentation of the Institutional or Career and/or University Program Improvement Plan. Prior to entering the accreditation processes, universities submit a Compliance Report for the PMIA and PMCA, and their adherence is verified.

However, an opportunity for improvement for the agency would be to systematize the monitoring of improvement plans through platforms or systems that allow better backup of documentation. In general, the implementation of these instruments allows HEIs to identify opportunities for improvement and strengthen capabilities for the development of improvement plans, which contributes to the continuous improvement of the quality of education.

3.3. Peer Reviewers

CONEAUPA is responsible for selecting and appointing Academic Peers to conduct external evaluations as part of the accreditation processes. According to Article 42 of the Consolidated Text of Executive Decree 539, the Academic Peers Data Bank (ad hoc technical commissions) is managed by the Executive Secretariat. The



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agency conducts an open call for national and international candidates, allowing interested individuals to submit their data and documentation throughout the year. CONEAUPA periodically evaluates and selects peers based on its needs.

Registration forms for peer recruitment are available on the CONEAUPA website. Once the requirements are completed, personal and professional information is evaluated according to the general criteria required. The peer selection process is regulated by the Resolution containing the External Evaluation Process. CONEAUPA also maintains relationships with other international accrediting agencies, which have provided peer evaluator references for its database.

Peers registered in the database receive training prior to each external evaluation process. Guides for preparing documents before the on-site visit are also provided, and a video call is conducted to address major concerns. After the on-site visits, the performance of the ad hoc Commission's coordinating peer is evaluated, and a self-assessment survey is administered to each external peer. An opportunity for improvement would be a reflective meeting with national academic peers to evaluate the entire process, including the performance of external academic peers.

CONEAUPA has specific regulations for each phase of the accreditation process. Both the Resolution related to the External Evaluation Process and the commitment agreements signed by the peer evaluators are subject to established guidelines and procedures. Additionally, each ad hoc Commission is accompanied by technical staff from the agency, whose role is to ensure compliance with the process as stipulated in the regulations.

Peer evaluators selected for "in situ" evaluations are chosen following the established procedure, ensuring that they are appropriate for the characteristics of the institution or program being evaluated. Furthermore, institutions and programs are offered the opportunity to object to the selection of a peer if they consider them unsuitable for conducting the on-site evaluation. A member of the ad hoc Commission is a national peer, who plays an active role in contextualizing national regulations and the substantive characteristics and functions of the evaluated institutions.

Once the on-site visit is completed, the performance of the ad hoc Commission's coordinator is evaluated, and this information is tabulated to verify their performance, as well as the self-assessment of the academic peers. The agency's technical staff also provides a report on the development of the visit and any incidents that may have occurred.



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An area for improvement is to expand the peer bank by extending invitations to other agencies so that a larger number of professionals whose profiles meet the requirements of various processes in different areas of knowledge are available. Similarly, it is advisable to offer them training and contextualization in country-specific processes, as was done with RIACES.

3.4. Decision Making

The National Council for Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAUPA) serves as the evaluator and accreditor of higher education institutions and also administers the National System for Evaluation and Accreditation for the improvement of higher education quality in Panama. The law delineates its functions, including the organization and coordination of the external evaluation phase of universities by external peer evaluators.

The Consolidated Text of Executive Decree 539 specifies in its article 48 that the Council conducts a comprehensive assessment of the self-evaluation report, the Institutional Improvement Plan (PMI), the final report from peers, and other elements, if applicable, to grant accreditations. The Decision-Making Guides for institutional, program, and course accreditations establish the procedures for substantiating decision-making regarding accreditation.

The Agency has a decision-making body, the Plenum, composed of eleven honorary members "who represent the different sectors involved in the development and transformation of higher university education in the country." Once the on-site visit process is completed and the final report is received, the assigned technician compiles the university's administrative file. The Executive Secretary receives the file and, if the university does not achieve 6 years, sends a formal communication with the final report from the Ad Hoc Commission, granting 5 days for the university to respond if it so wishes. The response is reviewed by the Executive Secretary and sent to the Ad Hoc Commission, which meets and analyzes it. This step concludes with the acceptance or rejection of the response, which remains as an internal report of the Agency.

In the session of the Plenary of the Council, the Executive Secretary presents the Decision-Making Table and the Table of results obtained by each university undergoing the process. The Plenary deliberates in a transparent and expeditious manner. Regarding the responses, the Executive Secretary explains them to the Plenary, including any incidents that may have occurred, and whether the university decided not to respond, indicating its agreement with the outcome, after which the



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Plenary deliberates and makes a decision on the period of validity for the institutional or program accreditation.

It is worth noting that in the first process conducted in 2012-2015, there was no Decision-Making Table, which favored very subjective decision-making, a situation that has been rectified with excellent results since there was no possibility of influencing the outcomes presented by the peer evaluators.

CONEAUPA makes impartial, rigorous, and consistent decisions, using the criteria established in the Decision-Making Guide and relevant regulations. The documents are comprehensively valued, even when they are based on reports from different perspectives of the evaluation team.

It is important to reiterate that the procedure indicates that each external academic peer prepares an individual report and then they prepare a consensus report that is used for the on-site visit, making it clear that there is a reflective and debate process supported by the self-evaluation, the evidence, and the improvement plan, which as indicated, is the basis of the on-site visit and the drafting of the Final Report, endorsed by each member of the designated Ad Hoc Commission.

The decisions issued by the Agency are based exclusively on public criteria and procedures, which are part of the national regulations and are published in the Official Gazette. The decisions are justified only in relation to criteria and procedures. During the Accreditation Phase, the basis for decision-making, the outcome of the process, and the delivery of the institutional or program accreditation or reaccreditation certification are detailed.

The documentation that records CONEAUPA's accreditation decisions is clear, precise, and is securely preserved as they are published in the Official Gazette. The minutes of the CONEAUPA Plenary, which record the debate and arguments of the members, are securely kept in both bound print and digital formats in the offices of CONEAUPA and are available for verification at any time.

Additionally, the university has access to information about the development of its process and the certification issued by CONEAUPA, as well as its dissemination on the Agency's website, following its publication in the Official Gazette.

3.5. Transparency

The National Council for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAUPA) serves as the state accreditation agency under the Ministry of Education (MEDUCA). Its primary function is to ensure that Higher Education Institutions across the country



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comply with government regulations. These regulations are published in the "Regulations" section and "Resolutions" subsection on the agency's website and in the Official Gazette, where all information regarding the processes of self-evaluation, external evaluation, and accreditation decision-making can be found, as well as the laws and decrees governing the National System of Evaluation and Accreditation.

A noteworthy aspect involves the coordination between CONEAUPA and the Technical Commission for Academic Development (CTDA), which has led to the unification of oversight instruments in accordance with Article 32 of Law 52 regarding the Favorable Report that the CTDA must issue for the accreditation of courses or programs. These instruments include faculty, student records, student evaluations of the course or program, approved or updated curricular design, and physical facilities. To acquaint universities with the tools that inspectors will apply, an orientation session was developed for universities in the Health Sciences area entering the accreditation processes, and a second session aimed at the inspectors.

The agency makes all information related to the accreditation process publicly available on its official government website, allowing any interested party to access it. Additionally, they offer telephone support to users to provide guidance on using and searching information on their website.

CONEAUPA identifies its stakeholder groups, which include higher education institutions, students, graduates, and faculty. To keep them informed and up-to-date, the agency organizes seminars, trainings, and workshops in the three phases of the accreditation process. These events are directed at the accreditation teams, who in turn share the information with their stakeholder groups, such as students, faculty, employers, administrative staff, authorities, graduates, and professionals, inviting them to participate.

Furthermore, to enhance its customer service, the agency has a "Public Inquiries" site accessible by email. This channel allows users to make inquiries related to the functioning of the entire system, which are answered by the Executive Secretary or the Deputy Secretary. If necessary, inquiries are forwarded to the Technical Commission for Academic Development (CTDA).

After each training session, a space is provided for inquiries, which are answered by the agency's technical staff. If necessary, the technical staff discusses among themselves based on the regulations to provide precise responses.

Therefore, it can be affirmed that CONEAUPA fulfills its primary function of ensuring compliance with government regulations in Higher Education Institutions at the



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national level. Moreover, it is distinguished by its efforts to make all information regarding the accreditation process public and accessible, as well as by keeping its stakeholder groups informed through various communication channels and training sessions.

Acknowledgments:

- CONEAUPA maintains a registry of peer evaluators in line with the characteristics of the evaluation and accreditation processes, who receive training and are subjected to evaluation processes by the agency.
- It is evident that the accreditation decisions made in the Plenary of the Council are based on outcomes from self-evaluation reports, external evaluation, and responses, if any. It is corroborated that the decisions are impartial, rigorous, and consistent with the evaluation matrices and rubrics.
- The decisions of CONEAUPA are respected by the Ministry of Education and are made public through the website and the Official Gazette, which keeps its stakeholders informed: administrators, faculty, students, and alumni of the country's universities, MEDUCA, other governmental bodies, and the general public.
- The decisions of the Council are recorded in the minutes of each session and are available for consultation by any citizen. The agency makes all information related to the accreditation process publicly available on its official governmental website, so that anyone interested may access it. Additionally, they offer telephone support to users to provide guidance on the use and search for information on their website.

Recommendations:

- It is noted that the documentation on self-assessment and, consequently, external evaluation is capable of improvement for institutions, programs, and courses, particularly in terms of incorporating or refining the measurement of learning outcomes, and the assessment of achievement and impact of research results in Higher Education Institutions that are universities, among other aspects demanded by the trends, challenges, and demands of Higher Education, which would allow for the recognition of the quality of education offered by universities in their various modalities: face-to-face, virtual, distance, and their various combinations.
- External evaluation is primarily based on capacity and process indicators. There is a need to strengthen the incorporation of achievement and impact indicators, which have already been identified for inclusion in the evaluation



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model following discussion with the national academic community. Furthermore, according to the opinions of some interviewees during the agency's visit, it is identified that the evaluation is primarily focused on indicators of the teaching mission function, and it is important to reflect on the importance of giving equal attention to other mission functions, especially research since it involves the evaluation and accreditation of universities, which are characterized as institutions that involve postgraduate programs and research.

- Strengthen peers each time modifications or updates to the evaluation model are incorporated. Likewise, enhance training processes to improve the presentation of written reports. Lastly, consider in the evaluation process, not only the agency's concept but also the university's concept.
- CONEAUPA periodically conducts the evaluation and selection of peers, according to its needs.
- An area for improvement involves establishing greater coordination with the CTDA to understand the responses that this entity, as part of the System, provides to public consultations related to the aspects corresponding to oversight.

CATEGORY 3: PROCESSES ASSOCIATED WITH EVALUATION	
Subcategory	Degree of compliance with the OPB.
3.1. Documentation Required for Evaluation Processes	Satisfactorily complies
3.2 External Evaluation	Satisfactorily complies
3.3. Peer Reviewers	Fully complies
3.4. Decision Making	Fully complies
3.5. Transparency	Fully complies

In summary, considering the analysis of the indicated subcategories, the team of peer evaluators concludes that CONEAUPA FULLY COMPLIES with the guidelines contained in Category 3: Processes associated with evaluation, and there are no non-compliances in the subcategories deemed essential: 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5.



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CATEGORY 4: EXTERNAL ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY

4.1 Accountability

CONEAUPA is the Evaluating, Accrediting, and Governing Agency of the System for Evaluation and Accreditation to Improve the Quality of Higher University Education. The Council is independent and decentralized, with financial, administrative, and regulatory autonomy, its own assets, and legal personality, and is represented by various stakeholders involved in the development of higher education in the country.

CONEAUPA's public accountability aims to present activities that align with its mission and purposes as the sole accrediting agency in Panama. The mechanisms used for this accountability include immediate posting on social media of activities being undertaken; a monthly activity report by the Executive Secretary to the Council members; and the production of an annual report presented to the Minister of Education and the Cabinet Council.

Similarly, information regarding the management of CONEAUPA is sent to the Minister of Education, who is the Chair of the Plenary. This information is shared during interviews with the media, meetings with the President of the Republic, and at national and international events, in accordance with the purposes of these events.

In monthly sessions, the Executive Secretary presents the consecutive agenda, verifying the regulatory quorum, approving the agenda, approving the minutes of the previous session sent to the Plenum members five days prior, presenting received correspondence, communicating completed activities and advancements according to the Annual Work Plan, and discussing activities requiring the Council members' approval and the Executive Secretary's Report.

The established approvals aim to set regulations and their publication in the Official Gazette, as well as their dissemination to the university community, for the processes of accreditation and/or reaccreditation, whether institutional, programmatic, or course-based, as determined by the regulations.

Furthermore, the Agency continuously publishes all its activities on its Instagram account (CONEAUPA), which serves to publicly validate its activities and the execution of processes in accordance with its mission and vision. This social network also serves as a public domain for the agency's accountability to the educational community in Panama.



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Finally, the Agency's annual report is presented to the Minister of Education and provides relevant information for the Minister to prepare the educational sector's report to be presented before the National Assembly, and it is published on the MEDUCA website for dissemination to the general educational community.

This report compiles the Agency's annual activities directed towards the accreditation processes with universities, as well as all activities involving the Agency in the dissemination of processes and engagements with other agencies, all aimed at fulfilling its purposes, mission, and vision.

CONEAUPA is committed to transparency and public accountability, responsibly aware of the importance of informing the general educational community about its management and activities. The immediate posting of activities on social media, the monthly activity report, and the annual report presented to the Ministry of Education are indicators of the commitment to enhancing higher university education in Panama.

4.2. Contribution to Policy Design

The Agency systematically compiles the scores achieved by universities on the accreditation matrix, which serves to guide universities in terms of improvement projects, forming part of the academic quality. It also analyzes the alignment of the Adjusted Institutional Improvement Plans with the quality assurance of the universities. The PMIs of the reaccredited universities are presented to the Plenum of CONEAUPA for approval and, through official communication, they are notified of their approval to commence the development of the projects. The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must annually report the progress of their Adjusted PMIs and receive a mid-term visit for monitoring by CONEAUPA's technical staff.

The Agency also participates in various conferences to disseminate the results obtained and to exchange information with other entities.

Furthermore, it collaborates on initiatives such as the one by the Institute for Training and Use of Human Resources (IFARHU) in the study on the country's human resource needs, which guides the offerings of both new and existing universities, impacting the processes of approval of new universities and accreditation.

CONEAUPA also participated in the International ARCA Meeting on Higher Education in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in June 2022, where it presented the best practices of disruptive strategies from its universities and organizations to achieve competitive success in the global society. At this event, Mr. Deputy Minister Castellero



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presented country-level reports on the quality of education at university institutions in Panama, as well as advancements based on the results obtained from their evaluations or accreditations.

From May 3 to 5, 2023, the Agency has been invited to participate in the General Meeting of the members of the Ibero-American System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (SIACES) and the Second EU-LAC Academic and Knowledge Summit involving national agencies from Latin America that address the public policy of evaluation and accreditation of university institutions and programs. At this event, the agency will have the opportunity to share advancements and benefit from the experience of other participating agencies.

CONEAUPA plays an active role in improving Law 52 and its regulations, addressing gaps that emerge as it evolves and consolidates as a national agency.

CONEAUPA collaborated on a book published by the Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Quality in Distance Higher Education (CALED) focused on Quality Assurance during the Covid-2019 pandemic, which disclosed the regulatory framework and outcomes, including participation in a conference in July 2021.

The Agency plays an active role in the discussion on higher education quality by participating in meetings, conferences, and presentations at the Bar Association and the Supreme Court of Justice regarding the quality of lawyer training; with the Social Security Fund on issues related to the practices and scope of accreditation with COMAEM for medical schools in Panama.

CONEAUPA shows an active and participatory commitment to the discussion and enhancement of higher education quality in the country, collaborating with various entities and participating in national and international conferences. However, an opportunity for improvement can be identified in the production of periodic publications based on the analysis of the combined results of its evaluations or accreditations, which could further contribute to the assurance of quality education.

4.3. International Updates

The National Council of University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA) fulfills one of its roles, which involves promoting and establishing cooperation links with prestigious evaluation and accreditation agencies, as well as managing its inclusion in international accreditation networks and agencies. CONEAUPA maintains an agreement with RIACES and contacts with other agencies for the collaboration of external peers.



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Among the current agreements, there is one with the Mexican Council for the Accreditation of Medical Education A.C. (COMAEM), which aims to contribute to the improvement of the quality of professional medical practice, and the Central American Agency for Accreditation of Architecture and Engineering Programs (ACCAI), which defines, regulates, and applies principles and standards of good practices for the accreditation of academic programs in Engineering, Architecture, and Design in the region.

There is also an agreement with the Council for Higher Education Accreditation A.C. (COPAES), which aims to accredit higher education academic programs in Mexico. Additionally, the Committee for the Evaluation of Pedagogy and Education Programs A.C. (CEPPE) seeks to contribute to raising the quality of education in Mexico and Latin America through a continuous process of updating and improving its accreditation methods. Finally, the Mexican Committee for the Accreditation of Agronomic Education, A.C. (COMEAA), establishes actions and agreements with CONEAUPA to carry out joint activities in the evaluation and accreditation of academic programs in the agronomic area.

Furthermore, there are agreements with important organizations in the field of education, such as CACSLA (now AICE: International Agency for Educational Quality) and CACECA, recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (COPAES).

The agency's staff has participated in various calls and events to exchange information and improve their own practices. For example, in 2021, they participated in the RIACES OBP2021 call, an event held via Zoom, and in the XIX RIACES Assembly, which took place in September 2022 in Colombia.

It is worth noting that in July, commemorating the Agency's anniversary, a Virtual Conference was held addressing topics such as the quality of higher education during and post-pandemic from a humanistic and critical perspective, as well as successful synergies that enhance the content and teachings at HEIs in relation to sustainable innovation with positive impact on both students and professors. The conference featured participation from university rectors, members of the CONEAUPA Plenum, international peers, and university quality assurance units.

As we can see, CONEAUPA is committed to the continuous improvement of the quality of higher education in its country and in the Central American region. This is evident in its active participation in international quality assurance networks and associations, as well as its ongoing updates on international advances and discussions in this field. Moreover, it considers the relevant elements of these



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discussions in the analysis of its processes, demonstrating its commitment to academic excellence and continuous improvement.

4.4. Collaboration with Other Agencies

The CONEAUPA has conducted a self-evaluation, comparing its practices, criteria, indicators, and processes with those of equivalent agencies to enhance its policies and procedures. Documentation supports these comparisons, revisions, and feedback received from other agencies about the matrices approved by CONEAUPA. For example, technical staff have visited CNA Colombia, ANEAES in Paraguay, CNA Chile, and JAN in Cuba to understand their processes and matrices (2012), which served as references for the development of the first institutional accreditation matrix. Additionally, consultations were held with experts such as María José Lemaitre from CINDA and Bernardo Cuéllar and Zulma Marucci from Paraguay.

In 2022, CONEAUPA and RIACES organized a Diploma in Quality Assurance in Higher Education for over 50 national and international peer reviewers, a highly enriching activity as peers not only refreshed theoretical aspects of accreditation and quality assurance but also engaged with the matrices and standards of CONEAUPA to carry out the processes. They also had the opportunity to connect with other agencies, establishing mutually beneficial relationships among participants in their roles as peer reviewers.

The agency maintains a database of qualified peer reviewers and consults with other agencies to understand how they conduct the accreditation process and coordinate joint activities, such as the in-situ visits conducted with COMEAA in Mexico and virtually with ACCAI.

The international academic peer database allows for the evaluation of the agency's processes in relation to other countries, and feedback provides a benchmark for improvement.

The Agency has operational collaboration agreements with other similar national or international bodies. Agencies such as COMEAA and ACCAI have established agreements with CONEAUPA to issue certifications for the recognition among agencies of accredited programs. The process includes visits by national peers to the university's country, coordination of an agenda previously agreed with the university, exchange of process information, and meetings with interest groups. After the visit, an evaluation report is prepared with recommendations for the university's improvement plans. Finally, CONEAUPA recognizes the accreditation decision issued by the Agency and issues the corresponding certification.



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The Agency promotes the mutual recognition of its accreditation decisions with other agencies. CONEAUPA has reached not only a national but also an international level; it has conducted accreditation processes in 30 universities and is now participating in accreditations outside Panama. It has participated in four international accreditations in Mexico, in Guatemala with ACCAI, recognized the certifications issued by COMEAA for five agricultural science programs at the University of Panama, and participated as peer reviewers in the programs accredited by this agency, as well as having a relationship with CEPPE to accredit programs and careers at the Central American level.

The Agency collaborates with agencies in the evaluation of transnational programs, both in terms of programs under its jurisdiction being offered abroad and for foreign programs entering its jurisdiction. CONEAUPA has also sent comparative analyses of matrices to initiate the accreditation process with the CEPPE agency.

A memorandum of understanding is being coordinated with the ACAP for the evaluation of the postgraduate academic offer in higher education teaching from public and private universities.

The Agency coordinates and follows up on the evaluation processes of medical schools from official and private universities, facilitated by the Mexican Council for Accreditation of Medical Education A.C. (COMAEM), an entity endorsed by the Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education (COPAES), the Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES), the World Federation for Medical Education, and The National Committee on Foreign Medical Education and Accreditation (NCFMEA). For example, CONEAUPA coordinated the Induction to Accreditation Workshop Course aimed at teams responsible for the accreditation process of the Medicine career. The training was conducted virtually by COMAEM from Monday, April 17, to Thursday, April 20, 2023.

Acknowledgments

- CONEAUPA promotes and manages collaboration with other agencies, which has supported the strengthening of its instruments, processes, and procedures. Additionally, in an act of national commitment and responsibility, it strives to achieve the evaluation and accreditation of some national programs and courses for which there are yet no instruments for evaluation and accreditation.
- As a result, cooperation with international accreditation agencies is a good strategy as it brings additional benefits such as recognitions by the WFME



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and the Washington Accord. However, it is recommended that CONEAUPA progress in developing its own frameworks

Recommendations

- There is no evidence that CONEAUPA has mechanisms in place to periodically provide public accountability in a formal setting with the participation of representatives of stakeholder groups and strategic partners, to present periodically and systematically, beyond disseminating its activities through social networks and technical reports to the Council Presidency. It is recommended that accountability be understood as the act of reporting, dialoguing, and responding clearly, concretely, and effectively in a public forum to the requests and needs of interested parties (citizens, organizations, and interest groups) regarding the management conducted, the results of its action plans, and the respect, guarantee, and protection of rights.
- The Agency is current with international discussions about quality assurance as a result of its participation in international quality assurance networks or associations. However, it is not evident that the outcome of these discussions is enriching CONEAUPA's evaluation model in terms of incorporating Learning Outcomes, incorporating indicators to recognize the quality of education in various academic offerings, and incorporating indicators that further promote Science, Technology, and Innovation in the quality assurance processes of Panamanian universities.
- Conduct periodic publications based on the analysis of the combined results of its evaluations or accreditations through technical bulletins with periodic results, which can serve any of the stakeholder groups, potentially further contributing to the quality assurance of higher education in Panama.
- CONEAUPA plays an active role in improving Law 52 and its regulations, addressing the gaps that emerge as it evolves and consolidates itself as a national agency.

CATEGORY 4: EXTERNAL ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY	
Subcategory	Degree of compliance with the OPB.
4.1 Accountability	Partially complies
4.2. Contribution to Policy Design	Satisfactorily complies
4.3. International Updates	Partially complies
4.4. Collaboration with Other Agencies	Fully complies

In summary, based on the analysis of the indicated subcategories, the team of peers concludes that CONEAUPA satisfactorily complies with the guidelines contained in Category 4: External activities of the agency, and there is no non-compliance in the essential subcategories: 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the analysis of the following assessments:

Category	Degree of compliance with the OPB.
1. Quality assurance agency	Fully complies
2. The agency's relationship with higher education institutions	Fully complies
3. Processes associated with evaluation	Fully complies
4. External activities of the agency	Satisfactorily complies

The team of peer evaluators concludes that CONEAUPA FULLY ALIGNS with the guidelines contained in the RIACES Best Practices Guidance Manual (OBP).

This external evaluation report is submitted to the RIACES Executive Board for the relevant purposes and is signed on the 22nd day of May 2023 by those who acted as peer evaluators.



Fernando Cantor Rincón



Iván Ramos Calderón